

BAPTISM, RECONCILIATION AND UNITY -
TOWARDS A MUTUAL ACCEPTANCE OF BAPTISMAL DIFFERENCES

by

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SUMMARY

From earliest times Christians have differed among themselves concerning their understanding and practice of baptism. In the early church of the third and fourth centuries there was a remarkable variety of baptismal practices within the 'One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church', including infant baptism, believers' baptism, delayed baptism, emergency baptism and death-bed baptism.

In subsequent centuries, diversity of baptismal views and practices was greatly restricted by ecclesiastical and civil repression. In more recent times increasing religious freedom and the growing fragmentation of 'Christendom' have resulted in various baptismal practices developing, usually associated with certain traditions and denominations. Today, three major baptismal traditions can be identified: Catholic, Reformed and Baptist, each with their own particular insights, strengths and weaknesses. Something of a theological stalemate has been arrived at today in the arena of polemical debate for one particular baptismal position.

The visible unity of Christians with one another in the world is intimately linked to their divine calling to be a witness to the saving, healing and reconciling work of God in Christ. The ability of Churches to incorporate legitimate diversity within an authentic unity is vital to their ministry in and to a broken and alienated world. Many differences of baptismal understanding and practice constitute just such a legitimate diversity. In any Christian hierarchy of truths the imperatives of love, reconciliation and unity must rank higher than matters of baptismal rites and doctrines. To allow baptismal differences, therefore, to divide Christians from one another constitutes a failure of Christian love.

Empirical research has revealed a widespread and strong desire for a unity that could transcend baptismal differences. The ideal has already been implemented within a number of individual congregations and in a few denominations and found to be workable. The challenge remains to the wider Christian community to allow genuine freedom of conscience in baptismal matters within one united Christian fellowship.

Key terms:

Baptism; Reconciliation; Unity; Infant baptism; Believers' baptism;
Rebaptism; Catholic; Reformed; Baptist; Sacrament; Rites; Freedom;
Hierarchy of truths.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 A broken world and a healing God A number of dramatic events marked the closing years of the 1980's and the opening years of the 1990's: the collapse of communist power in East Europe, the destruction of the Berlin wall, the end of apartheid in South Africa, the release of Nelson Mandela from prison. These led to a certain euphoria in many circles, the expectation of a new world order in which the nations and peoples would be willing to work together for the good of all. Such euphoria, however, was quickly dissipated by the grim realities of the new patterns of conflict that emerged in the post cold war era: ethnic and religious conflict in the former Yugoslavia and other former communist countries, ongoing violence and bloodshed in various countries in Africa as well as many other parts of the world. All these serve as a reminder of the brokenness of the world, its terrible divisions and hostilities along the lines of race, ethnicity, language, culture and religion.

For the Christian believer this brokenness, hatred and violent conflict is a manifestation of the deep and terrible alienation with which sin has cursed the world. People have become alienated from their God and thus also alienated from one another, hostile to God and hostile to one another. Christians also believe, however, that this same God, the one true God who made all things and all peoples, is actively and savingly involved in the world to overcome these alienations so that human beings might be reconciled to God as their Father and to one another as brothers and sisters. The Holy Scriptures, venerated as such by Christians, contain powerful images depicting a reconciled and united world, united and reconstituted around the healing and saving Word of the Lord. The prophet Isaiah saw the mountain of Yahweh's temple becoming preeminent in the last days. All the nations will stream to it saying: 'Come let us go up to the

mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths' (Is.2.3). The beneficial consequences of the divine law spreading from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth would be peace and prosperity among the nations who will 'beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war any more' (Is.2.4). In another place Isaiah also speaks of the coming of the Anointed One, a descendant of David, who will rule the earth with righteousness, justice and power. And the fruit of his just and beneficial rule would be a state of unprecedented peace, reconciliation and harmony in which

the wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. (Is.11.6,9.)

This prophetic vision of a reconciled, healed and united world is focussed in a unique way in the coming of Jesus, the Anointed One, the Word of God incarnate who by his atoning death on the cross destroys the dividing wall of hostility and alienation that he might reconcile to God all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven (Eph.2.14 Col.1.20). Through this One, the divine Word, anointed with the Spirit and power to bring salvation and healing to the world it is the purpose of the Father to accomplish his grand recapitulation, the bringing together under one head all things in heaven and on earth (Eph.1.10). It is significant that the book traditionally placed at the end of the New Testament, The Revelation or Apocalypse, which draws so heavily on the apocalyptic and eschatological imagery of the Old Testament prophets also gives us some of the most stirring pictures of a reconciled humanity and a healed world. In that book is glimpsed 'a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and

in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." (Rev. 7.9-10.) Precisely the differences that have always given rise to so much hostility and conflict - national, tribal, ethnic, linguistic - are seen in a reconciled unity around God and his Christ. The final chapter of Revelation, reworking a vision of the prophet Ezekiel (freely combined with other biblical themes), portrays a healed, redeemed and fruitful world:

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as a crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of the lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and for ever (Rev. 22.1-5).

The first fruits of this redeemed, renewed, reconciled and saved community, born from above by the power of the Holy Spirit, obtained concrete and visible reality (albeit in a partial and limited way) in the community of people who believed the good news of the kingdom and were baptised by one Spirit into the fellowship of Christ, in which 'there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Gal. 3.27). To the church, as the beginning of God's new creation on earth, is given also the ministry of reconciliation, to act as God's ambassadors on earth urging all people everywhere to be reconciled to God in Christ (2 Cor. 5.16-21). However the process is not quite as simple as might appear from a superficial reading of the New Testament. From the very beginning the church itself stands in need of healing. Christian believers struggle to realise their unity and to shake off the old patterns of hostility. Jews find themselves instinctively

repulsed by 'unclean' Gentiles. Masters find it difficult to regard their slaves as brothers in Christ. Men do not readily grant equal status to women. The spirit of the world and the Spirit of Christ strive for supremacy within the church and within every believer. The alienations, hostilities and prejudices of the world are too easily and too often imported into the church, straining its unity, sometimes to breaking point. Again and again the church is divided along exactly the same fracture lines as society, and differences between Christians in certain points of doctrine and practice give rise to even further divisions within the body of Christ. For all these reasons the church in history has struggled to maintain (or to achieve) unity. Christian divisions have sometimes resulted in terrible violence and bloodshed, as for example in the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Europe.

While the bloody violence and hatred between different Christian communities witnessed in previous centuries have, mercifully, for the most part, passed away, yet patterns of intolerance, division and hostility still persist to a large extent. Indeed, the extraordinary and rapid proliferation of new Christian denominations in the present time, each with their own particular doctrinal and liturgical distinctives, would seem to point to a growing disunity rather than unity among Christians today. Nevertheless, whatever the visible appearance of things might be and however we might interpret them, Christians remain committed by their very faith to be always making efforts to promote unity and reconciliation between believers - as well, of course, as reconciliation and peace in a broader sense among all peoples. This thesis represents just one such effort. The causes of division between Christians are legion: doctrinal, cultural, historical, political (in fact all these factors are invariably involved in any particular division). In this thesis the focus is on one particular issue that has been and is the source of much division between Christians and churches, the issue of baptism. What is the nature and function of baptism? What happens when a person is baptised? Ought baptism to be restricted to those able to confess their faith in Christ or may the children of believers also be baptised?

1.2 A historical survey of baptismal differences and discussions

1.2.1 The Early Church The early church saw surprisingly little strife over the issue of baptism despite the fact of the development of a wide variety of baptismal practices. Although scholars differ in their interpretation of the evidences of baptismal practices in the early centuries, there is one matter in which a broad and general consensus of scholarly opinion is agreed, and that is for a period of at least two hundred years there existed in the church considerable flexibility in its baptismal practice. Evidence exists of the practice of infant baptism, child baptism, adult baptism (also of those born in Christian homes), immediate baptism, delayed baptism, emergency baptism, death bed baptism, lay baptism, clinical baptism and various modes of baptism. All that can be said with certainty is that there was both development and variety in baptismal practices within the one Catholic church until at least AD 400 (Roy 1987:11). Even when there was some contention and strife over baptism, the particular issues were strange to modern ears - not the question of whether infants could be baptised or not, or whether sprinkling was as legitimate as immersion but whether baptisms performed by heretics were valid or whether there could be any forgiveness for sins committed after baptism.

The establishment of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman empire by the end of the fourth century and the growing body of legislation making any form of heresy or dissent punishable by law bode ill for the continuance of a broad and flexible policy concerning baptism. The baptism of infants born to Christian parents became established as the norm (if it was not before) and factions opposed to infant baptism became marginalised and increasingly forced into dissident groups outside the church. Rebaptism, in particular, was viewed in a most serious light. Theodosius II (408-450) issued no fewer than sixty laws against heretics, including those against rebaptisers. A law of the Emperors Honorius and Theodosius II of the year 413 provides:

If any person is convicted of having undertaken the rebaptism of a member of the Catholic Church, the one who has committed this shameful crime, together with the one - provided he is of accountable age - who has allowed himself to be persuaded thereto, shall be punished with death without mercy. (Warns 1962:119.)

1.2.2 The Middle Ages Justinian (527-565) renewed and made more severe the laws against heretics. Part three of his *Corpus juris civilis* elevated the resolutions of the great Church synods into statutes, concerning which all further discussion was legally forbidden. An entire section dealt with rebaptism. As Roman law was adopted in nearly all European states the laws against heretics found general application. (Warns 1962:120.)

Notwithstanding the harshness of these penalties inflicted on non-conformists, evidence of dissident groups of Christians, of varying degrees of orthodoxy, occur regularly throughout the middle ages, many of them displaying credobaptist tendencies (the refusal to baptise infants). The Paulicans, a highly independent Christian sect which arose in the heart of the Eastern church about AD 750 (Kerr 1985:831), believed 'the Lord has taught us not to confer baptism on a person until he has reached the age of maturity' according to their manual *The Key of Truth* translated by F C Conybeare in 1898 (Kuen 1971:174). Peter of Bruys in France, who was burnt in St Gilles in the year 1130, strongly emphasized personal faith as the sole means of salvation, and made such faith a condition of baptism. He also repudiated the charge of rebaptism (Williams 1974:768 & West 1959:224). Arnold of Brescia, burnt in 1155, also rejected infant baptism. The Bohemian Brethren, later known as *Unitas Fratrum* and Moravian Brethren, originally rejected infant baptism, later accepting it in order to remove any suspicion of connection with the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century (Toon 1974:140 & Warns 1962:126).

1.2.3 The Reformation With the break up of the western Catholic church in the sixteenth century into various national Protestant churches, largely in the Teutonic north of Europe, and the Roman Catholic church loyal to the Pope, largely in the Latin speaking south of Europe, it is

not surprising that groups of credobaptist or 'anabaptist' Christians also flourished, especially in German speaking areas. No love was lost between any of these contending parties, Catholic, Reformed or Anabaptist. Luther, for example, considered the Anabaptists to be 'fanatics and scoundrels who abominated the Word of God' (Dillenberger 1961:229). Naturally there was nothing to be gained by entering into discussion with such. Not that the Anabaptists were very much inclined themselves to enter into discussion with those who held to infant baptism, 'the highest and chief abomination of the pope', as the Schleithelm Confession described it (Leith 1973:284).

As they did not gain the support of any political power, Anabaptists were fiercely persecuted by Roman Catholics and Magisterial Reformers alike. This policy resulted in the elimination of Anabaptists in Europe to a large degree with the exception of small isolated and introspective pockets here and there, such as in Holland where a somewhat more liberal religious policy prevailed. But the mould of medieval Christian totalitarianism had been broken irrevocably and the gradual growth of religious freedom in Europe meant that dissenting Christian bodies enjoyed increasing freedom to establish themselves and to spread. The first English speaking Baptist church (from which the modern Baptist movement can be traced) was formed in Holland by a group of English Independents who had sought refuge there from persecution in England and who had been influenced in a credobaptist direction through their contact with a group of Dutch Anabaptists. Baptist churches grew quite rapidly in England in the seventeenth century, especially during the Commonwealth period (1654-1658) when the Puritans under Cromwell were in the ascendancy (Lewis 1975:16). Despite increased freedom, however, dialogue between seventeenth century English Baptists and Anglicans was generally marked by a harsh acrimony, as the following description by Beasley-Murray shows in his introduction to a book by Aland translated by him:

The discussions evidently did not lack warmth, as the titles of the works that were issued indicate. Daniel Featley's *The Dipper Dipt* (1644) was answered by Henry Denne's *Antichrist Unmasked* (1645); Samuel Fisher's *Baby Baptism mere Babism* (1653) was matched by

Richard Carpenter's *The Anabaptist washt and washt and shrunk in the washing* (1653) (Aland 1963:17).

1.2.4 The Modern Period The restoration of the monarchy and the Church of England resulted in renewed difficulties for Baptists and other non conformist groups in England leading many of them to settle in the newly founded colonies in America. Despite initial difficulties encountered even there, it was in America that Baptists for the first time enjoyed full liberty of conscience, and during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries experienced extraordinary numerical expansion, so much so that by the twentieth century they constituted the largest Protestant ecclesiastical tradition in the country. This was a new and unusual experience for Baptists who in previous times and other places had always been regarded as a small and insignificant sect. Indeed, the very successes achieved by Baptists in America, resulting in their becoming an 'established', 'main line' church, have given rise to serious discussions and considerable debate over the question of a Baptist theology of the child and how Baptists view their own children (Miller 1992:58). Baptists have increasingly acknowledged that in their historical struggle against infant baptism and their struggle for freedom to maintain their witness they have failed to develop an adequate, coherent theology of the child (Lorenzen [s al:270). The trend towards the baptism of ever younger children in the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest Baptist body in the world, has led to the charge 'You Baptists have come the full circle - right back to infant baptism' (Ward 1966:12). Some Baptist theologians (admittedly very few) have even suggested that in certain circumstances infant baptism is valid and desirable (Hayward 1967:60).

If the success of the Baptist movement has led to Baptists asking some critical questions concerning their own practice, the twentieth century has seen unprecedented critical discussion by paedobaptist scholars on the subject of baptism. It was bishop Westcott, who at the beginning of this century prophesied that the next great theological controversy would be centred upon baptism (Lampe 1967:vii), and so it has been (along with other issues). Mention can be made in passing of the debate carried out by the two German scholars Joachim Jeremias and Kurt Aland in a series of

books published by them in the 1950's and 1960's on the question 'Did the early church baptise infants?' The sheer theological stature and influence of Karl Barth meant that his repudiation of infant baptism provoked an intense and scholarly debate. Barth's own colleague at Basel, Oscar Cullmann, wrote in defence of the primitive practice of infant baptism. Many other leading theologians and scholars also took up the pen to make a contribution to this debate. The document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* produced by the World Council of Churches is widely reckoned to be the most significant theological product of the ecumenical movement to date. The greater freedom enjoyed by Roman Catholic theologians after Vatican II has resulted in many valuable contributions from that quarter as well, such as the collection of papers on baptism published by The Murphy Centre for Liturgical Research (1976) under the title *Made, Not Born*. Indeed, amongst all the confusion and growing complexity of the contemporary ecclesiastical scene one positive gain can be registered and that is the greatly improved tone of baptismal discussions in the twentieth century.

The positive note on which the last paragraph ended needs to be tempered by a few realistic observations. Most of the contributions to the baptismal debate on a scholarly level from the credobaptist perspective have come from ecumenically minded Baptists. To what degree these scholars represent the rank and file of Baptists and Baptist Associations around the world is questionable. Furthermore, Baptists represent only a minority of those Christians and churches in the world today holding to a credobaptist position. The twentieth century has seen the phenomenal growth of the Pentecostal movement, from small beginnings in Azusa Street in 1906 to more than fifty million adherents in the 1980's (McClung 1986:159). For the most part Pentecostal churches strongly reject infant baptism. Closely linked to the Pentecostal movement has been the Charismatic movement which really began to take off within the main line churches from about the 1950's. Those influenced by the Charismatic renewal have been estimated at about 100 million. The late David du Plessis claimed there were close on 50 million Roman Catholic Charismatics alone (Lederle 1986:5). More recent estimates of Catholic Charismatics have been 80 million (Pierson 1993). Now while these 'main line' Charismatics have shown every indication, by and large, of staying in

their denominations, the indications are that they will be accentuating the baptismal debate within those same denominations. Prof. Walter Hollenweger of Birmingham once forecast that by the turn of the century the Pentecostal-Charismatic component will compromise more than 50% of Christianity (Lederle 1984:139). All of this points to one certainty, that discussion around the subject of baptism will continue to be lively for the foreseeable future, both in scholarly and academic circles as well as in the arena of popular debate. It points also to the urgent necessity of finding ways to ensure this discussion can be fruitful and constructive, for the edification, enrichment and empowerment of the whole church in its primary task of working for the salvation, reconciliation and healing of the world and all its peoples.

1.3 Methodological and Procedural Considerations

1.3.1 The writer's vantage point It is impossible to divorce a thesis of this kind from the perspective and context of the writer. The writer's own experience and convictions play an important role in the development and creation of such a work. Anyone taking up such a work will inevitably ask not only 'What does it say?' but also 'Who is saying it, and why? From what church does he come, and what theological framework?' The answers to all these questions contribute to the understanding of the work. What follows is a brief sketch of the writers spiritual and theological pilgrimage in answer to some of the above questions. If the use of the personal pronoun 'I' seems out of place in what is essentially an academic treatise and smacks more of a pietistic testimony session, then it must be remembered that that is precisely the context out of which this thesis is written, and therefore is also significant.

Raised as a Roman Catholic my early faith was shaped by the disciplined and ordered life of Roman Catholic boarding schools in Zambia and Zimbabwe which I attended from the age of five. Daily mass, regular catechism classes, periodic special retreats and the pervasive religious environment of a Catholic school all contributed to a faith which was accepted and appreciated as an important part of life. This faith, however, did not

long survive the harsher environment of a brief spell of employment on the lead and zinc mine in Kabwe, Zambia, my birthplace. By the time I went up to study Engineering at the University of Bristol in England I was a lapsed, or non practising, Catholic. The sudden conversion of a close friend (from a Presbyterian background) brought me into immediate contact, for the first time in my life, with evangelical Protestantism and its understanding of the gospel. After a period of resistance, debate and reflection, I experienced a renewal of Christian faith and took up again the practice of Catholicism in the regular attendance of mass and the sacraments. In the zeal of this renewal of faith, accompanied now by a regular study of the Bible, I found myself especially attracted to the enthusiasm, faith and Bible knowledge of a group of Christians associated with the Christian Union, an evangelical interdenominational Christian organisation on the University campus. By degrees, without ever making a conscious decision to leave the Catholic church, my worship and fellowship came to be entirely in Protestant evangelical circles, and the subsequent development of my faith and spirituality strongly influenced by that tradition.

But Protestantism, I soon discovered, had its own perplexing varieties: Calvinism, Pentecostalism, Paedobaptism, Credobaptism and many other ecclesio-theological systems claiming 'highest truth' status. Return to Zambia and fellowship with a Brethren Assembly there led to my being baptised as a believer. A vocation to full time Christian ministry brought me to South Africa to work in the townships under the auspices of the Dorothea Mission. Exposure there to the multiple groups of Christian churches and organisations, orthodox and unorthodox, foreign and indigenous brought home to me the devastation wrought by the fragmentation of the Christian community into countless divided and often antagonistic groups. Convinced that I should at least identify myself with a particular church (up to then I had been satisfied to be a Christian 'belonging to no particular sect') I became a member of Central Baptist church in Pretoria. Some years later I entered the Baptist ministry. Further experiences and studies led to another conversion in my life, a very gradual conversion over a long period of time, an ecumenical conversion. This conversion in no way nullified my previous evangelical conversion, but rather

complimented it, putting it into perspective. Together with conservative evangelicals I remain convinced of the supremacy of Christ, the authority of the Scriptures and the urgency of world evangelization. With ecumenicals I share the pain of the scandal of Christian divisions and the burden to promote reconciliation and unity between Christians, all Christians, 'until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God' (Eph. 4.13). The conviction that the various Christian traditions, whatever the legitimacy of their historical origins, can and ought to engage in dialogue with each other for mutual enrichment, the strengthening of common bonds and the advancement of the gospel in the world is the inspiration behind this thesis. Only as Christians walk in the way of reconciliation and unity can they be a witness to a divided and broken world and an instrument for its healing.

1.3.2 The structure of the thesis The very wide variety of baptismal practices in the world today are classified by the writer into three broad categories: Catholic, Reformed and Baptist. Chapters two, three and four represent a summary of these three approaches. By 'Catholic' is meant not only the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church but that of all churches which hold to a 'high' sacramental view of baptism, stressing its efficacy in conveying that which it represents, regeneration by the Holy Spirit. The Reformed understanding of baptism is also sacramental, but one in which special emphasis is laid on the divine covenant of grace, particularly in the case of the children of believers who are baptised as children of the covenant. The Baptist understanding is one which restricts the administration of baptism to those able to make a personal confession of faith. Underlying this thesis is the conviction that there are theologically powerful and compelling cases to be made for each of the above approaches and it is important to realise this as a basis for any further considerations of reconciliation and unity. That is why this thesis begins with a fairly full exposition of these three approaches.

The acute difficulty of adequately and accurately summarizing a tradition other than your own lies behind the writer's decision to choose three authors representing the above traditions and to summarize their work, as

far as possible, in their own words. The purpose of this exercise is to underline the conviction expressed above, that there is a powerful and compelling case to be made on biblical and theological grounds for each of the three major traditions, whatever one's personal conviction might be. An appreciation of this basic fact is important for the appreciation of subsequent arguments, considerations and proposals contained in this thesis. The concern to summarize these works fairly and accurately led to the summaries becoming fairly long. Concerning the choice of authors, the criterion was not necessarily the best or the most representative work available, but simply an author who stood squarely within a particular tradition and whose work represented (in the writer's view, anyway) a compelling and convincing treatment of the subject. The choice of Liam Walsh to represent a Catholic understanding of baptism was made in dialogue with Bonaventure Hinwood of St John Vianney Seminary in Pretoria. Beasley-Murray's work is internationally recognised as probably the standard work on baptism from a Baptist perspective - although his approach is more 'sacramental' than is true of most Baptists. König is a South African scholar in the Reformed tradition whose work is probably little known outside South Africa as it was written in Afrikaans. In South Africa, however, it is recognised as a standard work, and represents one of the most valuable treatments of the subject this writer has read. Exerpts from König's work have been translated into English for the sake of readers not familiar with Afrikaans.

In chapter 5 the writer enters into a limited dialogue with the three above mentioned presentations, not with a view to judging who is right or wrong but rather with a view to probing and discerning particular strengths and weaknesses present in all three presentations. A few pages are also devoted to pointing out some neglected areas not really dealt with by any of the three authors, particularly the issue of lay baptism.

Chapter 6 is devoted to the historical question. The debate between Joachim Jeremias and Kurt Aland over the question 'Did the early church baptise infants?' is examined and the writer suggests an alternative hypothesis to those proposed by Jeremias and Aland as an explanation of baptismal developments in the early church. This chapter closes with the

conclusion that all contemporary baptismal practices are developments of those of the early church.

Chapter 7 could be seen as the 'heart' of this thesis. It seeks to show that there can be no effective pursuit of truth apart from a deep concern for unity. With application to the controverted question of baptism, this means that all attempts to discover 'the truth' about baptism are in vain if they are pursued in loveless separation from other Christians. A deeper understanding of baptism will only be achieved in an atmosphere of respect for other views and love for those who hold to them together with a desire to be reconciled to them.

Chapter 8 enquires as to what steps the various separated Christian traditions could take to promote a greater sympathy and understanding of each other, with a view to facilitating a process of growing together. Just as divorce and schism are invariably preceeded by a period of growing apart of two parties that were united, even so a period of growing together is needed to prepare the way towards unity and reconciliation between estranged parties.

Chapter 9 explores the concept of a hierarchy of truths, seeking to distinguish between primary and secondary aspects of the Christian faith, and to make the point that obedience to the truth of the gospel sometimes requires a certain flexibility in secondary issues.

Chapters 10 and 11 are the fruit of empirical research conducted by the writer. Chapter 10 examines a number of congregations and churches which have attempted to bridge 'the water that divides', and attempts to gauge what measure of success has attended these efforts at reconciliation. The Faith and Order paper *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* is also examined as an attempt to produce a consensus document on baptism. Chapter 11 analyses the responses received from 182 theological students (and some teachers) in five theological institutions and representing more than twenty denominations to a questionnaire on the practice of baptism and its relation to Christian unity.

In chapter 12 the writer seeks to draw together all the various threads - theological, historical and empirical - of the previous chapters and produces some definite and concrete proposals for baptismal practice that would result in a model for reconciliation.

Final conclusions are drawn in chapter 13.

1.3.3 A question of terminology Symptomatic, perhaps, of the misunderstandings, tensions and conflict over baptism is the matter of a mutually acceptable terminology. One term, in particular, is problematic - 'believers' baptism'. The term has acquired general acceptance in the literature on baptism to describe the position of those who insist that personal faith is an essential requirement for baptism, and who therefore do not baptise infants on the grounds that they cannot (yet) believe. The objection, however, has been raised that paedobaptist churches also practise believers' baptism, baptising as believers all those coming to faith in Christ from a non Christian background and those who have never been baptised for whatever reason. And even infant baptism is every bit as much believers' baptism as is the case with the baptism of adults, as the importance of faith in both cases is equally emphasized and required from all parties, including the infants being baptised - as soon as they are able to believe. Those objecting would further argue that the real distinctive of so-called 'believers' baptism' is not the insistence on faith but the rejection of infant baptism, so therefore that position would better be described as 'antipaedobaptist'. Technically speaking, there is some force to this argument. Practically, though, it is not the solution as the term is unacceptable to those holding this position. Just as the sixteenth century Anabaptists never accepted that term for themselves as they did not see themselves as 'rebaptising' anyone, so contemporary adherents of 'believers' baptism' find it unacceptable to be defined in a negative way, seeing themselves simply as insisting on the necessity of faith as a condition for baptism. In an ecumenical context it is undesirable to use a term to describe a group that is offensive to them. The problem remains, however, that paedobaptists also practise believers' baptism alongside the baptism of infants and do not like the

restrictive use of the term 'believers' baptism' as if it were only practised by those rejecting infant baptism.

The present writer is not the first to struggle with the issue of terminology. Jeschke (1983:14-15), in a preface to his book *Believers Baptism for Children of the Church*, considers a number of terms. After considering 'believers' baptism' (the most commonly used term) and 'believer baptism' (favoured by Paul Jewett [1978]) he finally opts for 'believers baptism' (without the apostrophe, thus functioning as an adjective and not a possessive). Towards the end of the writing of this thesis, the term 'credobaptist' was encountered (Kingsbury 1993:228), which has the advantage of not only rhyming with paedobaptist but also of functioning as smoothly as the latter term as an adjective. There is still no satisfactory solution to this problem and I have attempted to show sensitivity towards those unhappy with restricting the term 'believers' baptism' to churches rejecting infant baptism by avoiding it where possible, sometimes putting it in inverted commas, and sometimes using 'credobaptism' - though doubtless the last named term is also open to the same objections. Let the reader note that the writer is aware of and sympathetic to the problems associated with these terms. Furthermore it must be noted that where the term 'believers' baptism' or 'credobaptism' is used, it is used as a technical term to identify a particular tradition. This is also how the term 'infant baptism' or 'paedobaptism' is used. Paedobaptists, of course, do not only baptise infants, but the term is used as a technical term denoting the whole 'package' of that particular tradition.

1.4 The Goal The goal of this thesis can be simply stated: to make a specific contribution towards the reconciliation and reunion of Christians traditionally alienated and separated from one another over the question of baptism. It is true, of course, that in no case is baptism the single and only issue separating Christians. There are always other issues. But this thesis focusses on this one issue in the conviction that principles and methods emerging out of this study can be applied to other issues as well.

It is a very specific contribution. To begin with it is a Baptist contribution, from one who is deeply involved in and committed to the work and ministry of the Baptist Union in Southern Africa, an association of Baptist churches of South Africa. It is also a conservative contribution, from one who is convinced of and committed to a conservative and traditional understanding of the historic Christian faith and many of the beliefs associated with such an understanding: a high view of the authority and inspiration of the holy Scriptures; an orthodox understanding of the traditional Christological and Trinitarian symbols of faith, such as Nicaea and Chalcedon; and a strong desire to see all people everywhere confessing Jesus Christ as Lord to the glory of God the Father. Such a perspective would be branded by many today as fundamentalist. But the spirit of fundamentalism, as that word is commonly understood today, is not conciliatory but rather separatistic and anti-ecumenical. The purpose of this thesis is to promote understanding, reconciliation and growing unity. The ecumenical note sounded in this thesis is not the result of a weakening of evangelical and biblical convictions but rather the logical fruit of such convictions; the belief that central to the work of Christ witnessed to by the Holy Scriptures is the reconciliation of all people in one body through the blood of the cross (Eph. 2.14-18).

The revival of scholarly interest in the subject of baptism has led to much important work being done in this area. Consultations, dialogues and discussions, formal and informal, official and unofficial, have been carried out in an atmosphere of mutual respect unprecedented in more than a thousand years of Christian history. Valuable and fruitful work has been done in trying to resolve differences and come to an agreement on a single consensus statement on baptism - such as the work of the Commission on Faith and Order in producing the BEM document - and such work must continue. What this thesis is concerned to show is that reconciliation and unity cannot wait until such agreement is achieved, but can be and must be implemented while the discussion is still in process. There are pressing theological and psychological reasons for such action, and, indeed, the fruitful progress of the ongoing baptismal discussion is dependent upon it. To show that immediate, concrete steps towards reconciliation and unity are both possible and necessary, theologically and practically -

that is the goal of this thesis. While the great bulk of work being done in the area of baptism concentrates on the meaning and implications of baptism, the careful analysis of different understandings and practices of baptism, the positive exposition of one particular approach or the attempt to find consensus, this work is concerned to develop a theological basis for the coexistence of different baptismal practices and understandings within the unity of one Christian fellowship.

CHAPTER 2

A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

Liam G Walsh OP *The Sacraments of Initiation*

2.1 Preface For the Protestant reader Catholic sacramental theology can seem to be an unfamiliar world at times. One reason for this is that Catholic theology is concerned to be faithful not only to the original Apostolic teaching witnessed to in the biblical texts but also to the tradition which has interpreted and maintained that teaching. This long tradition over many centuries has developed its own specialised terminology and it is this terminology which gives Catholic baptismal discussion its own particular character. Yet it is important for the Protestant reader to endeavour to understand this terminology so as to grasp the essence of what is being taught. Since Vatican II there has been a pronounced attempt by many Catholic theologians both to ground and express Christian doctrine in more directly biblical categories. This, in turn, has led to a more fruitful dialogue between Protestant and Catholic theology with the hope of the enrichment of Christian theology in general.

2.2 Introduction and biblical orientations

Before discussing the doctrine and practice (word and rite) of baptism, Walsh has a few introductory chapters in which he discusses the concepts of rites and sacraments. He is concerned from the outset to clearly establish that rites and sacraments have to do with life, the divine life that comes to human beings through Jesus Christ, and can never be understood apart from that.

To become a Christian is to join a community of people who believe that Jesus Christ brought eternal life into this world and who celebrate together their sharing in that life while they are waiting for it to be fully realized when Jesus comes again. Believing in life and celebrating the wonder of it is a good description of what it is to be a Christian and a member of the Christian Church. Belief is

brought about and expressed in *word*. Celebration is invited and expressed by *rite*.... [Christians] would like to be known most of all as people of *life*. The word in which they believe is the word of life. The rites they practise are for the giving and celebrating of life (Walsh 1988:1).

Not only have these rites to do with life, but very specifically the life that comes through Jesus.

Jesus, who is way, truth and life, brings about a total identification of rite, word and life in his own person. He is at once Word made flesh, Priest and Victim in a temple that is his own body, Eternal Life in his risen body. The understanding of Christian rites is dominated by this truth, because their whole purpose is to realize throughout time and space what God does once for all in Jesus. Rites which are not at one with his word and his life have no place in the New Testament (p 6).

As the whole Bible tells the life story of God's chosen people it includes descriptions of their rites and accounts of the part they play in life. 'The Old Testament presents a pattern of interaction between rite, word and life that has its own historical consistency but that also reaches out to a future transformation.... The New Testament teaching about individual rites such as Baptism and Eucharist can best be understood against this background' (p 11).

The first Christians believed that in Jesus God made the definitive covenant promised by the prophets of Israel. They believed themselves to be the People of the New Covenant. No sooner had they come to this certainty, on the day of Pentecost, than they began to tell their story and to celebrate it in rites. What they told about themselves centred on the event that brought them into existence as a community of believers - the death and resurrection of Jesus and his glorification in power at the right hand of his Father. Their story, written in the books of the New Testament, is the story of him; the rites they began to practise are memorials of him (p 14).

Walsh stresses the central importance of the concept of the body of Christ in the new covenant. '... his body makes all previous rites obsolete. If people are going to have their lives brought in touch with the work of God, they must now do it by getting in touch with the body of Christ' (p 15). The strong emphasis in the NT on the passing away of the old with its ceremony and ritual might seem to indicate there is no further place for rites in the work that God is now doing in the world through Christ and his Spirit. The passing of the ritual priesthood emphasized in the letter to the Hebrews; the hard things Paul has to say about the law of the Old Testament and its ritual prescriptions; the age of the Spirit with its worship in spirit and truth proclaimed in the writings of John; all these would seem to point in this direction.

Yet rites there were from the beginning, and their introduction is attributed to Jesus himself. Chapter 2 of the Acts of the Apostles relates that when the new covenant was first announced in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost and the people who accepted the preaching of Peter asked 'what shall we do?' they were told, among other things, to 'be baptised' (v.38). When they were baptised they were gathered together into a community that met regularly for, among other things, 'the breaking of bread' (v.42).... The New Testament suggests some continuity between these ritual actions and the rites of the Old Testament. Baptism is a new kind of circumcision according to Colossians 2:11-13; Luke's account of the Last Supper presents it as a new Passover meal (p 16).

The rites of baptism and eucharist are mentioned regularly in the NT but even more importantly they are related uniquely to the life that is in Jesus and the actions that he performed during his own life. He was baptised in the Jordan, he sat down to eat and drink with his friends, and he commanded baptism to be carried out within a process of teaching that would call forth faith in Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Matt 28.19-20) (p 17).

The superiority of the New Covenant and the presence and power of Christ and the Holy Spirit in the Christian community does not mean, however,

there is never any inconsistency between rite and life in the church. But such inconsistencies, Walsh points out, are not a result of any deficiency in the rite as such but rather in the understanding of the significance and value of the rite.

In Romans 6(vv. 1-14) Paul explains how Christians have died to sin through being baptised into Christ Jesus. And yet they still sin! When Paul talks about the sins of Christians he never suggests that there is anything wrong with their Baptism. The rite does not become empty because of their sinful lives. He never makes a contrast between baptism of the heart and baptism of the flesh that would be comparable to what he does when discussing circumcision. To question the value of Baptism would be to question the reality of Christ. Because it makes one a member of the body of Christ, and because Christ is alive never to die anymore, Baptism is always life-giving (p 19).

2.3 Rites called sacraments

In this chapter Walsh traces something of the historical development of the Church's understanding of its baptismal and other rites together with some of the terminology used in speaking about these rites.

In the earliest centuries of the Church's existence the oath that a Roman soldier took on entering the service of the emperor was called a *sacramentum*. That particular use of the word evoked many of the qualities that Christians wanted to attribute to their rites, especially to the rites of initiation. 'In likening Christian initiation to an oath, *sacramentum* said it was a word, a ritualized word, a binding word about what one wanted to do with one's life' (p 22).

In time the **Greek Fathers** came to use the word *mysterion* for the rites of the Christian faith, thereby expressing the same reality intended by the Latin *sacramentum*. Both words became enriched with the biblical teaching about the mystery of God and the mystery of Christ, and could consequently bring these fundamental ideas to bear on the understanding of Christian rites (p 23).

The Church's understanding of the rite of baptism around the end of the fourth century is clearly illustrated in the baptismal addresses (or mystagogical catecheses) of four great churchmen and preachers of that time: Cyril of Jerusalem, Ambrose of Milan, John Chrysostom and Theodore of Mopsuestia.

The change of *life* brought about by the rites and required by them is also explained in the catecheses. It is a gift given in the rite but it is also a personal decision called for by the rite. There is an element of contract or covenant in the rite. It is referred to in the explanations of the rite of renouncing Satan. A new contract is being made with Christ, in place of the one that bound people to Satan. ... the word [sacrament] still carries something of the sense of commitment and oath that it had in the original Latin usage that has been noted in Tertullian (p 26).

Arguably the most powerful single influence in the Medieval and later development of Latin and western theology was that of **Augustine of Hippo**. An important element in the sacramental theory of Augustine that needs to be mentioned is the attention he gives to *word* in relation to the sacramental rite. This is an essential element as it greatly minimizes the risk of separating rite and life.

The spoken word makes a sacrament, not because of its sound or its obvious meaning, but because it expresses faith, the faith of the Church and of the one receiving the sacrament. The word expressed in the Scriptures, the Creed, the preaching and catechesis of the Church is all of a piece with the prayers and formulas that are spoken in the rites. All these words breathe life into the rites and relate the rites to the real life of Christians. They do it, ultimately, because in them is the Word of God in person. He is the reality that gives all these words of faith, and particularly the sacramental words that go along with the element, their life-giving power (p 30).

The great upheaval and violent polemic of the sixteenth century Reformation meant that neither Catholic nor Protestant theology was unaffected by the

need to repudiate the other. Thus it was that in the Council of Trent, which gave the Catholic Church a dogmatic teaching and way of speaking about its rites that dominated subsequent centuries, there is not much attempt to find common ground with the Protestants. Rather the differences are accentuated.

It is assumed that Catholics affirm what Protestants deny. Catholic doctrine on sacraments comes from Trent, then, with a heavy concentration on what needed to be reaffirmed against Protestant denials, and with little attention to what Catholics and Protestants might have together retained of the tradition.... At the heart of what Trent has to say about sacraments is that they are truly acts of God and of Christ, and that the life that comes from God through Christ and the Spirit is truly in them and is truly given by them - which is something that the words 'mystery' and 'sacrament' had surely meant throughout the Christian tradition (p 37,38).

Vatican II, some four hundred years after Trent, was able to reach out to that part of the tradition about sacrament that was specially patronized by the Reformers, concerning which Trent had been cool because the Protestants seemed to make it the only thing that mattered. Accordingly the place given by Vatican II to the word in the making of sacraments is much more profound and pervasive than Trent was able to recognize (p 41). The Constitution on the Liturgy states, for example:

Thus, for well-disposed members of the faithful the liturgy of the sacraments and sacramentals sanctifies almost every event of their lives with the divine grace which flows from the paschal mystery of the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Christ. From this source all sacraments and sacramentals draw their power (p 41).

2.4 A theology of sacrament

Catholic theologians, especially since Vatican II, tend to use the word *sacrament* in a wider and more flexible way than Protestant theologians. So Walsh is able to speak about Christ as the sacrament of God and the Church

as the sacrament of Christ with the other sacraments being different actualizations of the basic sacramentality of the Church.

In very general terms sacramentality refers to any manifestation in a sign of the mystery of God's life - the giving of it by God and the receiving of it by humans.... It occurs most perfectly in Christ. He is the Word of God made flesh, who does not just speak for God but is God; he is and does what he says. He is also the perfect human response to God, his Father: ... He is, for all these reasons, the primordial Sacrament of God. As soon as one says that Christ is the Sacrament of God one is already bound to say that all other sacramentality is derived from him and draws its power from him (p 48).

But now the Church can be called the Sacrament of Christ because the prophetic, priestly and kingly rôles which Christ fulfils in his own person for the salvation of the world are shared by this community.

The memory of the risen Christ is kept alive, by word and rite, in the community of believers founded on his apostles. In telling the story of Christ as vouched for by the apostles and in performing the rites given by the apostles in memory of him, the members of the Church make him present throughout time and space somewhat as his personal body made him present to those who saw and heard and touched him during his days on earth and in the event of the resurrection (p 48).

This power the Church has to make Christ present and visible can function even when those who are exercising it are not fully living in Christ. 'In such a theology the objective reliability of individual sacraments and their independence of the holiness of the minister can be seen as a particular instance of something that is part of the very nature of the Church' (p 49).

Walsh stresses that this sacramentality of the Church is realized through the interaction of words and rites. Word is not an alternative to sacrament, neither is sacrament a refuge from word. The words are confessed

and celebrated in the rites and the rites embody the Word and words that he speaks through and with them (p 50).

Logically and historically Baptism and Eucharist are the first two sacraments of the Church. Baptism ritualizes the beginning of life. To be in the Church one has to leave the world of sin and escape from the power of the devil. Being in Christ means passing with him from death to life. Baptism ritualizes these different aspects of the crucial moment of life's beginning. In the liturgical and doctrinal tradition Eucharist is seen as completing the process of Christian initiation begun in Baptism so that one is not fully a Christian until one has taken part in it for the first time (p 51).

Finally, in this chapter, Walsh touches upon the issue of sacramental causality. How do the sacraments produce their effects? Does a Catholic theology of sacrament allow for the possibility of salvation without sacraments?

...sacramental experience is, indeed, necessary for human salvation but God can and does act to save outside the Christian sacraments; some sacraments are necessary for all believers, others only in particular circumstances; the grace of sacraments can be given in certain cases without the actual sacrament. What emerges from these considerations is that sacraments are for the benefit of humans and their salvation. When they serve that purpose God wants them to be used. When they do not he gives people another way. And yet the sacramental way has a kind of normative value in the history of salvation and the other ways of salvation that God uses will always show traces of it (p 63).

2.5 Baptism: the rite

2.5.1 Description In describing the rite of baptism it is best to have primarily in mind the rite for adults in which the Church expresses all that it means by Baptism without qualification. Not that the baptism of

children is any less baptism, but such rites do represent an adaption of the sacrament to particular circumstances (p 65).

Almost all are agreed, states Walsh, that the most appropriate mode of baptism is immersion, either wholly or partly in water, as is the practice in the Eastern Orthodox and Catholic Churches. Most churches in the West settle in practice for a pouring of water on the head of the one being baptised. There is also the practice, more problematical, of sprinkling (p 65).

Preceding and following the essential core of the baptismal rite are secondary rites and ceremonies that accompany the transition from one way of life (dominated by sin and the devil) to another (in Christ and his Church). These could include exorcism, the renunciation of sin and the devil, anointing with oil, and the lighting of candles (p 66).

2.5.2 History Concerning the history of the rite of baptism Walsh traces its roots to the ritual bathings practised in Judaism such as those associated with the community at Qumram and more directly to the ministry of John the Baptist. The *Didachē*, generally dated about AD 100, already allows a triple pouring of water on the head in place of immersion in running water (p 67). In the Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus, written about AD 215, we have a very full description of Christian initiation, mentioning, among other things, the baptism of little children, the putting off of clothes, exorcisms, renunciations, the recitation of a creed, chrismation and the kiss of peace (p 68).

When Europe became almost entirely Christian the great majority of those being baptised were infants, and a rite was developed for baptising them which was a rather ill-disguised adaptation of the rite for adults. This gave more prominence to the passive ritual elements that suited an infant and in time a rather passive ritualism came to be accepted as normal, even in the baptism of adults (p 69). The reforms called for by Vatican II were meant to restore values of the tradition that had become obscured and to recover the truth and realism of the ritual that one senses in the early tradition (p 70).

2.5.3 Initiation Baptism is a rite of initiation and as such can be compared to rites of passage and initiation found in other social and cultural contexts. Anthropology and other social and psychological sciences can help one to understand something of what is going on, how the rites of Christian baptism can be touching the human spirit on the deep level where it wrestles with issues of life and death (p 70).

The Jewish initiation rite of circumcision is of particular interest for understanding baptism, being the way of entry into the covenant community of God's people and the mark of belonging to it. Yet circumcision was also a rite of tribal initiation which baptism can never be.

It [baptism] is a rite of freely chosen entry into a community in which the only basis of belonging is the choice of God, and in which there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. From this point of view, rites of free choice and personal conversion offer a better anthropological model for Baptism than do rites of growing up and growing old within a particular culture (p 71).

2.5.4 Water To fully appreciate the significance of washing in water one needs some help from history as well as from psychology. There is in the Bible a record of salvation events in which water played a memorable part.

There are real events underlying the biblical stories about how God made and saved the world through water. They tell in their own way how it was from a watery chaos that the world was originally formed, how water destroyed sinners but saved Noah and his family in the Flood, how water destroyed the Egyptians and saved the Israelites at the crossing of the Red Sea, ... how the mystique of water was used by the prophets of Israel, how Jesus was baptised in the waters of the Jordan, how he used bathing and the water image in his preaching (p 72).

The psychological sciences, too, have established patterns linking water to the human way of dealing with life and death, birth and re-birth, creation and renewal, salvation and destruction (p 72).

2.6 Baptism: the word

For the Protestant reader this is probably the most important chapter concerning baptism in Walsh's book in which he deals in greater detail with the NT texts on baptism and endeavours to develop a comprehensive theological statement on baptism.

2.6.1 The New Testament In Acts 2.37-42 baptism is presented as the way in which those who 'receive the word' about Jesus and who repent, are granted forgiveness of their sins and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. By baptism they are gathered into the community of believers, the church. All the essential ideas about baptism, says Walsh, are in that text (p 77).

The accounts of the baptism of Jesus contain, in their own way, a theology of Christian baptism. Baptism is a beginning (of Jesus ministry); it is a declaration of divine sonship; it is a reception of the eschatological Spirit; and it is related to the death and resurrection of Christ. 'In accepting baptism for the sake of righteousness he is already giving himself, in a symbolical anticipation, to death. He did, in fact, speak later of his death as a baptism (Luke 12:49-50)' (p 78).

Paul, who makes frequent reference to baptism, places the rite within the working-out of the gift of faith, by which those who are called to justification take hold of the grace of Christ.

Although Baptism is done by the Church and its ministers, it is above all an action of Christ taking hold of those who are being saved, and a way in which sinners lay hold of the salvation which he brings. It is this Christ-centredness that gives Baptism its power to draw people together into one, regardless of who baptised them (1 Cor 1:12-17), or

whether they are Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female
(1 Cor 12:13; Gal 3:27-29) (p 78).

Paul's language about baptism is strongly realistic, describing a relationship with Christ that is a flesh-and-blood sharing with him which makes people sons of God as he is a Son. To believe in Christ and to be baptised into him is to be joined to his body; to draw life from him is to be a member of his body (1 Cor 6.12-20). The baptised are members of Christ and members of one another (Rom 12.3-8) (p 79).

In Romans 6 Paul explains that baptism takes away sin and death and gives new life through resurrection, the underlying principle being that Christ took away sin by his dying and rising: he died to sin once for all, and he rose to new life in God.

Going down into the water provides an experience of dying, and coming up, revived and refreshed, provides an experience of resurrection. The death and resurrection is with and in the death and resurrection of Christ, in which victory over sin is believed to be achieved. Hence, those who are baptised into Christ Jesus die to sin and rise to newness of life. Their sins are taken away: they are free of them; they no longer live in them but in God. All this is the grace of God, justifying those who believe, making them slaves of righteousness, ...
(p 79).

In the Johannine writings there are few direct references to baptism. In the discourse with Nicodemus (John 3) there is a direct reference to baptism which is presented as a re-birth 'of water and the Spirit' without which one cannot enter the Kingdom of God. The source of this baptismal re-birth is related to the Spirit (v. 5), to the cross (v. 14), to the saving will of God (vv. 16-18), faith (vv. 15,18) and obedience (vv. 19-20)
(p 80).

2.6.2 A systematic essay At this point Walsh summarizes his theology of baptism in one summary statement on which he then comments in some detail phrase by phrase. The statement is as follows:

Baptism is a work of God, in which he realizes his intention of giving salvation and the forgiveness of sin to all humankind, by incorporating into Christ, through regeneration in the grace of the Holy Spirit, and adoption to divine sonship those who believe in the Gospel and are converted from sin; this work is realized in and through the Church which is the community of those who proclaim Christ's death and resurrection and re-enact it in a water-rite that, as a sacrament, signifies and effects regeneration, incorporation and adoption by Father, Son and Holy Spirit (p 86).

In this statement Walsh seeks to include the essence of a Catholic understanding of the sacrament of baptism, and while it is impossible to reproduce his detailed exposition of this statement, we can note some of his comments.

The first thing he wants to say about baptism is that God is acting in it. It effects the forgiveness of sin which God desires for all humankind and hence 'It is carried throughout the world by believers with a missionary urgency that sometimes borders on the reckless, and is administered with a generosity that is always prepared to give the benefit of the doubt. For it is believed to be the gift of a God who wishes all to be saved by it' (p 87). With deliverance from sin and death comes liberation from all the forces that promote death and evil throughout the universe. 'Baptism is an act of faith in the victory of Christ over these powers of darkness. The baptised renounce them and are made aware that, in the power of the sacrament, they are delivered from them' (p 88).

In baptism Christ is recognized as the only Saviour, so that to be baptised is to choose Christ as the only Saviour. Equally, to choose Christ as Saviour is, in practice, to choose baptism (p 89).

Christian baptism is in water and the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is active in baptism and is given in it. The word regeneration describes the action of the Spirit in baptism whereby one is made alive in the body of Christ by rebirth in the Spirit (p 90).

Baptism requires faith and conversion on the part of the one being baptised, and indeed, it is itself a decisive act of faith and conversion. Baptism is about a decision for or against the God who saves the world in Christ and to accept baptism is to choose life over death. It is to pass from death to life (p 91).

Baptism into Christ is simultaneously baptism into the Church. It is in the community of the Church that Christ is contacted in the body and people are incorporated into him, so that the Church can be seen as an instrument of salvation, a community equipped to preach the Gospel and celebrate rites in which people take the Gospel into their lives (p 92).

Finally, the rite and words of baptism, when properly performed, cause what they signify. The action of God, of Christ, of the Church and of the participant are co-ordinated so that the effect of baptism is described as regeneration, incorporation and adoption (p 96).

2.6.3 Additional theological questions In this final section on his treatment of baptism, Walsh seeks to deal with some of those questions that arise out of the insistence, in Catholic theology, of the necessity of baptism for salvation. What hope is there for those who die without having received the rite of Christian baptism?

The first case is relatively straight forward and has to do with those who hearing the gospel believe in Christ but experience martyrdom for their faith before receiving baptism. In their case their martyrdom is called a baptism of blood.

If they are martyred for his name they do realistically what Baptism is designed to do ritually. Their death, indeed, expresses their faith in a better and more decisive way than ritual Baptism: they actually die with Christ, with a view to sharing in his resurrection; they become members of the heavenly Church even though they have never been full members of the earthly Church (p 98).

But what of those who die of natural or other causes without having received the sacrament of baptism but having expressed their desire for it in having been enrolled, for example, in the catechumate? In this case they are said to have received the baptism of desire. Their readiness to die in Christ was inherent in their intention to be baptised. The reality of the sacrament of baptism is brought about essentially by faith in Christ and sharing in his death, and any significant human action that manifests these choices is entitled to be called a baptism (p 99). It must be remembered, however, that:

Catholic theology has accompanied its teaching about Baptism of desire with a warning that anyone who, knowing what the Gospel says about the necessity of Baptism for salvation, does not take reasonable steps to be baptised in water cannot claim to be saved through Baptism of desire (p 99).

The concept of a baptism of desire also provides Catholic theology with a means of explaining how those without any explicit faith in Christ might be saved. Those who live well in accordance with conscience, who make a choice of good against evil strong enough to hold in the face of death and who thus make a choice of life that overcomes death - such can be saved by a baptism of desire. Implicit in such a baptism is the choice of Christ and the Church. Again, however, it needs to be mentioned that Catholic theology can never let its teaching about a baptism of desire 'become an excuse for not proclaiming the Gospel way of salvation to all, calling them to join Christ and his Church already in time through the water-rite of Baptism' (p 100).

In considering the necessity of baptism for salvation Walsh then gives attention to the question of the baptism of children, stating: 'There is nothing in the early records of the Christian tradition to suggest that there was a time when the Church did not baptise children' (p 100). The baptism of children and infants is grounded, like the baptism of adults, in faith, not only the faith of the individual but also the faith of the church of which the individual is a part. For this reason Walsh stresses 'that infant Baptism only makes sense to the Church when the parents of the

child want it and are ready, with the help of the Church, to ensure that the child will be formed in accordance with the life that has been given to it in Baptism' (p 101). Baptism embodies both the action of God and the human response to it.

For this reason it has within it not just the ministry of the Church that gives grace but also the Church's response of faith and love that receives grace. The response of the individual to the grace of Baptism is always cultivated and carried within this response of the community.... In identifying with the care and responsibility felt by the parents, the Christian community shows that it wants the gift of God for the child in Baptism. It is in this wanting of the Church (its faith in God's will to save this child) that the gift of God is actually given (p 102).

Baptism is always an act of God being met by an appropriate human response of faith. In the rite of infant baptism the faith is being professed by parents, sponsors and other Church members who ask, in faith, for the baptismal grace that leads to faith for one for whom they are responsible and who is dependent on them for his or her very being (p 103).

What about children who die without baptism? Led by the rigour of his own logic in his polemic against Pelagianism, Augustine could see no way of salvation for children who die without baptism. In practice the Church has tended to modify the strict Augustinian position by holding that infants dying without baptism would at least not suffer the pains of hell, although they would be deprived of the vision of God because they had never been reborn in grace. But even this is not fully satisfactory to many Catholic theologians who are still prepared to search for an alternative to the theological postulate of Limbo and to look for a way of affirming the salvation of unbaptised infants that will not contradict the tradition on the universal necessity of baptism, and the correlative universality of original sin. It can be reasoned from the universal saving will of God that unbaptised infants are saved in a way we know nothing about because God has not revealed it. Walsh also mentions the thesis of a certain V Wilkin who argues that infants are saved by the very fact of the resurrection of

Christ, without exercising any choice, as they were afflicted by original sin by the very fact of being born. However, Walsh notes, whatever theory is held about the possibility of the salvation of infants dying without baptism, it must not lead to any carelessness about baptising infants, as if it would make no difference anymore whether they were baptised in water or not.

CHAPTER 3

A BAPTIST PERSPECTIVE

Beasley-Murray G R *Baptism in the New Testament*

Beasley-Murray's book is not primarily a polemical book. The bulk of it consists of his exposition of the New Testament teaching about baptism and could have been written, in his view, "by a scholar in any Christian communion". He reserves his views on the more controversial subject of infant baptism until the last chapter, although his own Baptist convictions are clearly discernible in his exegesis of the NT texts.

3.1 The Antecedents of Christian Baptism

The Qumran community in the desolate area at the northern end of the Dead Sea practised frequent baptisms. Such customs were common to a number of Jewish baptising sects. Beasley-Murray points out that while attaching great importance to such lustrations

... the members of this sect had a clear understanding of the limitations of lustrations. They aspired to something more than ceremonial purity and they knew that lustrations of themselves could not bestow the moral purity they sought. ... Clearly, the 'waters of purification' were of themselves powerless to cleanse the impenitent; the purging of iniquities is 'through the holy spirit' and obedience to the commands of God. Here is a striking example of the Jewish ability to distinguish between 'outward and visible' and 'inward and spiritual', the ritual and the moral, flesh and spirit, yet a refusal to separate them (Beasley-Murray 1962: 14).

Although the frequency of the baths of the Essenes (at least three times a day) stands in strong contrast to the once-for-all rite of Christian baptism, nevertheless 'the first ablution of a novice was more than simply a first bath; it signified an entrance on to the state of purity and

consequently an entrance into the company of the purified' (p 17). Beasley-Murray sees a bridge from Qumran to John the Baptist: for both the End is near, requiring drastic moral preparation and a lustration apart from Temple worship (p 18).

Concerning the question of whether the Jewish rite of proselyte baptism exercised a dominant influence on the Christian rite, Beasley-Murray is strongly sceptical, observing that the decisive turn from 'death' whereby the heathen became a Jew occurred at circumcision and not at the bath taken seven days later, making it a mistake to read back the New Testament theology of Christian baptism into the Jewish understanding of proselyte baptism (p 29).

The most immediate antecedent of Christian baptism was John's baptism which Beasley-Murray calls a 'baptism of conversion' (p 34) and a clear illustration of the position 'that conversion and baptism are acts wherein the human and divine come together; the initiative and the power of both are with God, but neither is conceivable without the responsive human subject' (p 43). As has already been mentioned Beasley-Murray sees a far greater probability that John's baptism was influenced by the lustrations of the Qumran Covenanters than by the rite of proselyte baptism (p 40).

3.2 The foundation of Christian baptism

In this chapter Beasley-Murray deals with the baptismal texts found in the Gospels, especially those concerning the baptism of Jesus, the baptising ministry of Jesus and the Dominical institution of Christian baptism.

Why did Jesus come to the baptism of John, and what significance did He attach to His submission to it? After a lengthy survey of the scholarly discussion around this question Beasley-Murray ventures the following assertions:

Jesus came to the baptism of John, among the penitents of Israel responsive to John's proclamation, to begin the messianic task in its fullness as He interpreted it from the writings of the Old Testament.

... As Messiah, representative of people needing deliverance, Jesus demonstrates and effects his solidarity with them in their need. As such it is a momentous action, fraught with consequences to be revealed in the Kingdom and Judgment. In submitting to the baptism of John, the Lord condemns the self-righteous and the wicked for their lack of repentance and takes His stand with the publicans and sinners, as well as more respectable members of society, who look for the Day of the Lord (p 55, 60).

The eschatological significance of Jesus' baptism is also noted by Beasley-Murray: 'both the Messiah and the Spirit belong to the age to come. The opened heaven, the sending of the Spirit and the Voice from the Father all indicate that the last times have dawned, redemption is about to appear' (p 61).

As far as defining the relation between the baptism of Jesus and Christian baptism, Beasley-Murray is cautious, noting that '*no writer of the New Testament brings the baptism of Jesus into relation with Christian baptism*' (p 64). Nevertheless, he does recognise there must be some relation, mentioning in particular:

The most striking parallel between Jesus' baptism and ours is the descent of the Spirit on him and our reception of the Spirit in like circumstances. Again, however, the nature of the gift is different; for He comes to aid Jesus in the messianic task, while the believer is made anew through Him (Tit. 3.5f) (p 66).

A further feature in the baptism of Jesus which according to Beasley-Murray has significance for Christian baptism is that:

His submission to baptism among sinners was made *in freedom* ... Now it belongs to the essence of Christian baptism that the believer comes as receiver. He hears the summons of the Gospel, and in making the baptismal confession, 'Jesus is Lord' (Rom. 10.9), he casts himself on the saving grace of the Sovereign Redeemer. ... He receives the Lord, and gives - himself (p 66).

Is Mt. 28.18-20 a product of second generation Christianity, reflecting a theology characteristic of the end of that generation rather than its beginning, as is widely maintained by critical scholarship? After a careful and detailed consideration of the arguments Beasley-Murray suggests that the missionary and baptising commission is not unique to Matthew, but occurs in all the Gospels where reference is made to the proclamation of remission of sins or baptism. He quotes with approval the observation of Denney:

In all its forms the commission has to do either with baptism (so in Matthew and Mark) or with the remission of sins (so in Luke and John). These are but two forms of the same thing, for in the world of New Testament ideas baptism and the remission of sins are inseparably associated (p 80).

The situation envisaged in this commission of Mt. 28.18-20 is that

... proclamation of the redemption of Christ should be made and those responding in repentance and faith should be baptised and come under instruction. ... It is when a hearer believes and is baptised that he becomes a full disciple; which is the same as saying that a disciple is made such *in baptism by faith*. ... Baptising belongs to the means by which a disciple is made. The instruction comes after. Grammatically that is expressed by saying that the participle διδασκοντες (teaching) is to be seen as subordinate to the whole expression μαθητευσατε βαπτιζοντες (Make disciples, baptising), theologically by observing that the kerygma precedes the didache, the offer of grace before the ethics of discipleship, and it is when the gospel of grace is received that the ethics of gratitude may be learned and applied (p 89).

3.3 The emergence of Christian baptism: the Acts of the Apostles

Beasley-Murray quotes with approval W F Flemmington's characterization of baptism in the earliest church as a *sacrament of the gospel*. He also quotes

Schlatter who described the typical Apostolic sermon as 'a baptismal sermon: ... Its purpose was not merely the acceptance of an idea; it demanded a definite act' (p 99). In discussing the significance of baptism 'in the name of Jesus Christ' Beasley-Murray suggests that: 'The name of the Lord Jesus is *confessed* by the baptismal candidate and *invoked* by him' (p 101). He goes on to say that:

He that in baptism 'calls on the name of the Lord' (Acts 22.16) undergoes baptism in a prayerful spirit; it becomes the supreme occasion and even vehicle of his yielding to the Lord Christ. Here is an aspect of baptism to which justice has not been done in the Church since its early days: baptism as a means of prayer for acceptance with God and for full salvation from God, an 'instrument of surrender' of a man formerly at enmity with God but who has learned of the great Reconciliation, lays down his arms in total capitulation and enters into peace. ... Consequently, baptism is regarded in Acts as the occasion and means of receiving the blessings conferred by the Lord of the Kingdom (p 102).

In addition to the forgiveness of sins and incorporation into the people of God 'The third and perhaps most impressive gift of God in baptism is the Spirit, the possession of which was frequently accompanied in the earliest Church by spectacular charismatic gifts and signs' (p 104). After making the above statement, Beasley-Murray gives considerable attention to the various anomalies to be found in Acts: Apollos was not given Christian baptism in addition to his Johannine baptism while the Ephesian disciples were; the original disciples did not receive baptism after their Pentecost experience while Cornelius did. His conclusion is:

... where submission to the Messiah Jesus is accompanied by the possession of the Spirit, Johannine baptism needs no supplementing; where both are lacking, baptism in the name of Jesus must be administered.... But Johannine baptism without the Spirit is defective and must be followed by the baptism that bestows it (p 112).

A further lengthy review of the problem of the baptism of the Samaritans which remained defective until supplemented by the laying on of hands of the Apostles leads Beasley-Murray to observe that:

... while baptism and the Spirit are set in close relation, allowance must always be made for the freedom of God in bestowing the Spirit. ... God is not bound to his sacraments; ... the really important element in baptism is not the rite but that to which it points - the work of the Spirit in the man who recognizes the claim of the Lord on him by virtue of His accomplished redemption and exaltation (p 120).

In the same line of thought Beasley-Murray cites Eduard Schweizer who

... draws attention to the twice repeated utterance of the Lord, that John baptised with water but the disciples will be baptised with the Holy Spirit (1.5, 11.16); this shows that the supremely important matter was the outpouring of the Spirit and that baptism in water was the 'accident' of the greater gift. 'In which case', writes Schweizer, '2.38 teaches nothing other than that for Luke baptism belongs to the much more important fact of conversion' (p 121).

3.4 The development of Christian baptism in the Apostolic writings

3.4.1 Baptism in the Pauline Literature In this section Beasley-Murray deals exhaustively with every single text in the Pauline literature that has a direct or indirect reference to baptism. For the sake of brevity there shall only be summarised those portions that bear witness more directly to his understanding of baptism.

Romans 6.1f How does Paul envisage the connection between baptism and Christ's death and resurrection? After noting three different, and sometimes opposing answers to this question Beasley-Murray acknowledges truth in them all and seeks to combine them in the following statement:

... it can be shown that his [Paul's] interpretation of baptism in relation to the redemptive event of Christ has a threefold reference: first, it relates the baptised to the death and resurrection of Christ, involving him in the actual dying and rising of Christ Himself; secondly, it involves a corresponding event in the life of the baptised believer, whereby an end is put to his old God-estranged life and a new one begins in Christ and His Kingdom and His Spirit; thirdly, it demands a corresponding 'crucifixion' of the flesh and a new life in the power of the Spirit that accords with the grace received, which 'dying' and 'rising' begins in the baptismal event (p 132).

Beasley-Murray finds it impossible to hold to an anti-sacramentalist exposition of this text (eg that of Marcus Barth) which sees baptism as a symbolic attestation of a death and resurrection that have earlier been experienced. Equally, he maintains that baptism is what it is in Pauline theology only because the divine action and human responsiveness are inseparable.

The penitent sinner ... who by faith accepts God's judgement on his sin and in Christ finds life from the dead, *in that very act of turning to God* renounces his sinful life, condemns it to the grave of baptism and by grace begins the life of discipleship to the praise of God (p 143).

Galatians 3.26-27 'You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.' The close conjunction of these two sentences clearly affirms:

... that baptism is the moment of faith in which the adoption is realized - in the dual sense of effected by God and grasped by man - which is the same as saying that in baptism faith receives the Christ in whom the adoption is effected. Through such an alliance of faith and baptism, Christianity is prevented from evaporating into an ethereal subjectivism on the one hand and from hardening into a

fossilized objectivism on the other. The two aspects of Apostolic Christianity are preserved in faith-baptism (p 151).

Colossians 2.11f Beasley-Murray finds in this text Paul's authentic commentary on Rom. 6.1 ff. 'All that circumcision stands for, and more, has been fulfilled in the baptised believer through his union with Christ in His passion' (p 155). The transition from the old life to the new is clearly wrought by God, but equally clearly faith plays a vital part in this transition (p 156).

In answer to the suggestion that Col. 2.11 teaches the replacement of the rite of circumcision by that of baptism Beasley-Murray maintains 'the two rites were clearly maintained side by side in Palestinian churches and there was no possibility for baptism being regarded by them as in any sense a replacement of circumcision' (p 159).

1 Corinthians 6.11 'But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.' Is this a baptismal saying? Certainly, in Beasley-Murray's view, although no mere ritual purification is intended but 'a real release from their iniquity, forgiveness of their guilt and grace to forsake their evil ways' (p 164).

... the baptised is cleansed, consecrated and justified by the Name of the Lord Christ and by the Spirit of our God; not, of course, by the magic effect of pronouncing a name, but by the prayer of the baptised as he calls on the Name of the Lord and by the action of the Lord who is invoked, operating through the Spirit who is His Agent (p 166).

The assumption that this is a *baptism by faith* is implied by the inseparability of justification and faith in Pauline theology (p 166).

1 Corinthians 12.13 'For we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body ...' Again the question arises: does Paul here speak of a 'baptism of the Spirit' distinguished from the Church's rite of baptism? Beasley-Murray responds:

We have learned from some Pauline passages not to set faith and baptism in opposition to each other but to appreciate their inseparability in the penitent's experience of grace. This applies to the relationship of the believer with the Spirit equally as to his relationship with Christ. ... Not surprisingly then the baptism 'to Christ' (εἰς Χριστόν), which Paul described as a 'putting on' Christ, setting a man 'in Christ' (ἐν Χριστῷ, Gal. 3.27 f), is also said to be a baptism ἐν Πνεύματι - by the Spirit, in the Spirit, bestowing the Spirit; for it is only by the Spirit that a man can be in the *Koinonia* of Christ: ... (p 168, 169).

1 Corinthians 1.11-17 It has sometimes been suggested that Paul's words 'I am grateful that I baptised none of you except Crispus and Gaius.... For Christ did not send me to baptise but to preach the gospel' indicate a minimizing of the significance of baptism. Beasley-Murray cannot allow that Paul could have thought lightly of baptism or could have wished to give the impression that he did. He does admit, however,

... it yet remains true that 1 Cor. 1.17 gives the impression that Paul subordinates the administration of baptism to the proclamation of the gospel. That however is consistent with the nature of baptism itself. For the latter follows the proclamation of Christ and draws its meaning from the gospel.... it could be said that Paul's insistence that he was sent to preach, rather than to baptise, reflected his consciousness of the essential priority of his work if there were to be any baptisms at all! (p 180).

1 Corinthians 7.14 This reference to 'holy children' by Paul makes no mention of baptism as such, but is nevertheless considered by Beasley-Murray because it is often brought into discussions about baptism. The context in which the expression occurs is advice given to believers married to unbelieving partners:

... their union is not defiled by the continued unbelief of the one partner, nor is the believer besmirched by the unbeliever; on the contrary the non-Christian spouse is 'sanctified' by the Christian....

Defilement of the Christian by the unbelieving partner would mean that the children of the union were unclean, but the contrary is true: *the children are holy (ἅγιοι)! Therefore the unbelieving partner is holy (ἡγιασται)! (p 193).*

The fact that this 'holiness' is shared by the unbelieving spouse as well as the children means that it is not derived from baptism or inclusion along with the parent in the Covenant of God with his people.

Ephesians 4,5 '... one Lord, one faith, one baptism'. The conjunction of faith 'with baptism is significant as intimating yet again the connection between faith and baptism, observed frequently in Acts and Paul. Baptism is the supreme occasion of the confession of faith as it is faith's embodiment, subjectively and objectively' (p 200).

Ephesians 5,25-27 This reference to Christ cleansing the church by 'the washing with water through the word' is clearly a reference to baptism, as ordinarily received by the believer, in the view of Beasley-Murray. As to the significance of ἐν ῥήματι, this he understands as

... 'the word' in its broadest connotation - the Word of redemption and life that baptism itself enshrines, the Word summed up in the primitive confession, 'Jesus is Lord', acknowledged by the baptisand, and the Word that by divine authority apprehends the believer as the name of the Lord is proclaimed over him in his baptism... the baptism that sanctifies and cleanses is that in which the Word is heard, confessed and submitted to by the baptised. A baptism without the Word is a defective baptism, even as the Word is not truly heard, confessed and obeyed without baptism. The two are a unity in the will of God, forming a counterpart to the unity we have seen elsewhere in the conjunction of faith and baptism in the teaching of Paul (p 204).

Titus 3,5-7 'He saved us through the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit.' Few commentators would deny that the washing (λουτρόν) here spoken of refers to baptism. This text then brings together in a powerful way the concepts of baptism, regeneration (παλιγγενεσία),

renewal (ἀνακαινωσις) and justification (p 211). Regeneration and renewal are alike wrought by the Spirit - the Spirit bestowed through the mediation of the Christ in whose name baptism is performed. '...the grace that baptises is the grace that justifies, inseparably one and experienced as one' (p 216).

3.4.2 Baptism in the Johannine Literature Beasley-Murray begins this section by sounding a note of caution that 'we must beware of doing injustice to the thought of John by making exaggerated claims for his sacramental interests' (p 219). He mentions in particular the work *Early Christian Worship* by Oscar Cullmann (1953) who finds baptismal references in the following events: Jesus washing the feet of his disciples; the healing of the man by the pool of Bethesda; the blind man who received his sight after washing his eyes in the pool of Siloam; and the water and blood that flowed from the side of Jesus on the cross. To interpret these events and sayings in such a manner is surely to fall into 'the like error of early Christian writers, who read baptism into every mention of water in the Old Testament' (p 220).

John 3.3-5 The reference to new birth by water and Spirit in the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus inevitably directs attention to Christian baptism, especially at a time when the employment of water for cleansing in view of the last day had taken the specific form of baptism (p 228). But is it possible to attribute to the water as such an efficacy for rebirth of the same order as the work of the Spirit? Surely not, feels Beasley-Murray, when we read in the prologue to the Gospel of those who are born of God by receiving the Logos *in faith* (p 231).

... the new life from the Spirit in baptism (v 5) is indistinguishable from the eternal life in Christ granted on the basis of redemption to the man of faith (v. 15); and the right to be sons of God is given to those who believe on the name of the incarnate Word of God (1.12), sons who are begotten not of flesh and blood but of God alone (1.13). This conjunction of sayings concerning sonship to God and the life of the Spirit demonstrates that the redemption of Christ, faith and baptism are as inseparably intertwined in John as in Paul (p 231).

1 John 2.20,27 Concerning the 'anointing from the Holy One' possessed by the Christian recipients of John's letter Beasley-Murray writes:

In the light of the parallel statement in 2 Cor. 1.21, 'He that confirms us with you to Christ is God, who anointed (χρίσας) us and sealed us and put the earnest of the Spirit in our hearts', and of the analogy of our Lord's anointing with Spirit at his baptism (Acts 10.38), it is all but universally agreed that the occasion for the impartation of the chrism was baptism and that the chrism was the Holy Spirit (p 233).

The possibility that the chrism is *the truth of the Gospel*, received and confessed in baptism, is also considered plausible by Beasley-Murray (p 235).

3.4.3 Baptism in Hebrews and 1 Peter

Hebrews 6, 1-6 The conjunction of 'washings' (βαπτισμοί) and 'laying on of hands' in this list of foundational elements of faith affords a plain hint as to how both are to be understood: they are set in the context of the beginning of the Christian life - baptism (p 243). The inclusion of the laying of hands in this initiatory rite emphasizes that the new life in Christ is a life *in the Spirit* (p 244). The transition that a convert experiences in baptism is described as: enlightenment; tasting the heavenly gift; partaking of the Holy Spirit; tasting the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come (p 244). φωτισμός ('illumination') became technical from the time of Justin for the 'illumination' of Christian baptism. The Syriac versions (the Peshitta and the Harclean Syriac) render τοὺς ἅπαξ φωτισθέντας as 'who have once been baptised'. 'That the writer to the Hebrews does in fact have baptism in mind is not to be contested' (p 245).

1 Peter 3, 20-21 The chief lesson of this passage, in Beasley-Murray's view, is its emphatic denial that the external elements of baptism constitute either its essence or its power.

The cleansing in baptism is gained not through the application of water to the flesh but through the pledge of faith and obedience therein given to God ... it is faith assenting to God's grace and receiving that grace embodied in Christ (p 262).

3.5 The doctrine of Christian Baptism in the NT

3.5.1 Baptism and grace Beasley-Murray rejects the idea that baptism is a purely symbolic rite and quotes with approval the statement of Adolf Schlatter that there is no gift or power which the Apostolic documents do not ascribe to baptism (p 263). Such gifts and benefits would include the forgiveness of sins, union with Christ, the possession of the Spirit, regeneration, deliverance from evil and the inheritance of the Kingdom of God.

The grace offered in baptism is no impersonal influence, injected through material substances, but the gracious action of God himself. Baptism saves 'not because water washes dirt from the body, but as the occasion when a man is met by the Risen Christ' (p 265).

3.5.2 Baptism and faith Paul's statement in Rom. 1.16f that the Gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes ... 'for in it the righteousness of God is revealed *through faith for faith*' is characteristic of his emphasis on faith as the sole mode of appropriation of the Gospel (p 267). Baptism is a confession of that faith in Jesus as Lord (Rom. 10.9), a joyful committal of self to Him and an appropriation by faith of his boundless grace.

In baptism the Gospel proclamation and the hearing of faith become united in one indissoluble act, at one and the same time an act of grace and faith, an act of God and man.... in the New Testament faith and baptism are viewed as inseparables whenever the subject of Christian initiation is under discussion, so that if the one is referred to, the other is presupposed, even if not mentioned.... *for in the New Testament precisely the same gifts of grace are associated with faith as with baptism* (p 272).

3.5.3 Baptism and the Spirit Contrary to the teaching of many Free Church theologians Beasley-Murray maintains that in the NT 'baptism is the supreme moment of the impartation of the Spirit and of the work of the Spirit in the believer' (p 275). He is, however, able to appeal to the position of a fellow Baptist scholar of an earlier generation, Wheeler Robinson, who wrote:

When we speak of believers' baptism we mean that baptism in the Spirit of God of which water baptism is the expression.... *Baptism, in its New Testament context, is always a baptism of the Spirit* (p 277).

This reception of the Spirit in baptism is the necessary corollary to the union with Christ in baptism maintained in 2.5.1. The New Testament does not permit us to divide the Christ and the Spirit in baptism so that the new life of Christ and the new life of the Spirit in baptism may also not be divided (p 278).

3.5.4 Baptism and the Church Baptism into Christ is necessarily baptism into the Church, as the the Church is *σῶμα Χριστοῦ*, the Body of Christ. 'For we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body' (1 Cor. 12.13). This means that baptism is at once intensely personal and completely corporate, involving the believer in relationship simultaneously with the Head and with all the members of the Body (p 282).

3.5.5 Baptism and Ethics In his consideration of the New Testament evidence Beasley-Murray frequently noted that baptism in the Apostolic Church was a moral religious act. The repentance and faith of the baptised, he affirmed, 'are integral to New Testament baptism, involving a response of the whole man to the grace of God therein made known' (p 285). This is further underlined by the emphasis on teaching associated with the baptismal event.

But this baptismal ethic is of a unique order and is more than the candidate's acceptance of certain moral obligations. It is rather the outworking of an achieved redemption, into the power of which he has been drawn, the living out of what has happened in baptism. 'The basic

significance of baptism is participation in the death and resurrection of Christ, with the tremendous consequences that involves of a new life in the Holy Spirit orientated towards the all holy God' (p 286).

3.5.6 Baptism and Hope Baptism is an entry into the eschatological order of the new creation, as witnessed to in the baptism of Jesus when the heavens were torn apart, the Spirit descended as a dove and the voice of the Father declared his messianic status. The Messiah and the Spirit belong to the age to come (p 291). The union of believers with Christ in baptism is the assurance that they shall rise with him in the last day - and not only live with him but also reign with him!

As the grace of God in the Gospel gives an unfaltering promise to the believer, so the grace of God in baptism gives sure and certain hope to the believer concerning his final destiny. Dying with Christ the believer has been justified before the bar of God; rising with Christ he has entered the new creation; possessing the Spirit he has the first fruits of the Kingdom of God; a member of Christ, he shares his sonship and his inheritance (p 296).

3.5.7 The Necessity of Baptism The necessity of baptism would hardly have been questioned by a first generation Christian as in all parts of the New Testament baptism is presupposed as normative for the acceptance of the Christian faith and entrance into the Church (p 298). Yet to deny that saving faith can exist without baptism would be to overstate the case. It is made abundantly clear, especially by the evidence of Acts, that life is more complicated than formulations of doctrine. How can a scholar like Beckmann affirm that the word of God does not work 'without the water', when the Evangelist declares 'that the Spirit in his operations is as free and mysterious as the air in its movement?' (p 303). Beasley-Murray quotes with approval the statement of Wotherspoon: '*He who has faith, but cannot obtain a sacrament, has Christ: he who has a sacrament but has not faith has nothing*' (p 304).

While wanting to avoid the term 'necessary' when considering the meaning of baptism, Beasley-Murray prefers to recognise positively that God has

graciously given us sacraments for our good and that it is our part to receive them gratefully.

3.6 The rise and significance of infant baptism

3.6.1 The origin of infant baptism There is a long tradition in the Church that the practice of infant baptism has its origins in apostolic practice. Beasley-Murray, however, points to an impressive array of modern critical scholars, representing paedobaptist traditions, who question this assumption and conclude, rather, that 'compelling, direct proof from Scripture for the possibility of infant baptism cannot be brought' (p 308). The claims, however, that the practice of infant baptism can be grounded in the Apostolic practice recorded in the New Testament have been revived by Joachim Jeremias, Oscar Cullmann and others. To these claims then Beasley-Murray turns his attention.

Household baptism and the solidarity of the family

There are several instances in the New Testament where the conversion and baptism of whole households are reported. The 'all' in these instances, it is claimed, must surely include infants. To this Beasley-Murray responds that 'all' cannot be pressed to include infants in these instances otherwise we would be obliged to maintain such absurdities as that infants also spoke in tongues, rejoiced, believed and ministered to the saints! (p 315).

As to the plea by Jeremias that since baptism is an eschatological sacrament and the Church was living in the last days, baptism would not be envisaged as dividing a family Beasley-Murray responds that the Lord's teaching contemplates the opposite possibility, that the Gospel would bring division in a household, father against son, mother against daughter etc. Indeed personal religion was to be the hall mark of the new age. Beasley-Murray does not deny the reality of family solidarity, but simply emphasizes that it cannot be used as a 'proof' of the practice of infant baptism (p 318).

Jesus and the children Those Gospel narratives in which Jesus welcomed children brought to him and blessed them and rebuked those who would hinder them from coming to him are taken by many to be the ultimate authority for the baptism of infants. Especially the dominical words 'for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these' (Mk 10.14) are seen to be significant. Beasley-Murray responds by claiming that the central point of these narratives is to affirm the necessity of receiving the good news of the kingdom of God as *a child receives it*, in simple trust. It is their receptivity that is primarily in view. The thought of little children spontaneously coming to Jesus and clinging to him affords 'a picture of the ideal human response to the Lord's call in the Gospel' (p 326).

Proselyte baptism and the Church The Jewish practice of baptising proselytes and their children is often claimed to be the precedent and model of Christian baptism. Jeremias, for example, claims that Paul's teaching concerning the 'holiness' of the children of believers (1 Cor 7.14) demonstrates that the Jewish precedent was, in fact, followed. In response to this Beasley-Murray points out that the argument of 1 Cor 7.14 proceeds on the assumption that the 'holy' children in Corinth had not been baptised, for they were in a position comparable to that of the unbaptised parent (p 331).

I am accordingly compelled to the conviction that, far from demonstrating that the children of Christians in the primitive Church were baptised as in proselyte baptism, 1 Cor 7.14 fairly conclusively proves that the Churches of the Pauline foundation diverged from the Jewish tradition and baptised *none* of their children. From this conclusion I can see no way of escape (p 332).

Furthermore, states Beasley-Murray, it is impermissible to insist that John must have followed the precedent of proselyte baptism in this respect, presuming that he knew it. There were, in fact, a variety of views in Judaism at that time concerning the rightness of baptising young children.

The covenant, circumcision and baptism Scholars in the Reformed tradition have sought to ground the doctrine of infant baptism in

the biblical teaching of the covenant of grace, spanning, as it does, both Old and New Testaments. In this way baptism is the Christian equivalent of Jewish circumcision. Beasley-Murray objects:

This attempt to reduce to uniformity the old and new covenants and their respective sacraments belongs to an unrealistic mode of exegesis that fails to distinguish between shadow and substance, that fails to understand New Testament eschatology and that fails to take into account the significance of the resurrection of Christ and coming of the Holy Spirit (p 338).

Furthermore, Beasley-Murray points out, in the Palestinian Church the rites of baptism and circumcision must have been regarded as having quite separate functions, for Jewish Christians continued to circumcise their children, as part of their loyal observation of the Law (p 340).

The objectivity of baptism and the function of faith

For a number of theologians, especially those in the Lutheran tradition, infant baptism portrays in a more excellent way the truth that God has acted in Christ for our salvation without our knowledge or consent. Every objection, then, to the validity of infant baptism is a denial that salvation comes exclusively from God's grace in Jesus Christ. To this Beasley-Murray responds that Baptists have been just as concerned to maintain that salvation comes exclusively from God's grace, but have sought to hold together the sovereignty of God in election and the responsible freedom of man toward the Gospel, viewing faith as both gift of God and human response and declining to deny either reality. Baptism is the kerygma in action, proclaiming divine redemption and offering its fruit to human beings, and it is received as the kerygma must ever be received - in faith (p 346).

Infant baptism and alien influences If infant baptism cannot be grounded in the Apostolic practice recorded in the New Testament, what then is its origin? Beasley-Murray states the thesis that '*infant baptism originated in a capitulation to pressures exerted upon the Church both from without and from within*' (p 352). As large numbers of converts from pagan

background came into the Church their imperfect grasp of Christianity 'made it increasingly difficult for the Church to maintain its sacramental thought and practice unimpaired' (p 354).

As an example of early developments in the post-Apostolic Church Beasley-Murray cites the prolonged series of exorcisms which very early became an essential part of the baptismal rites. No trace of such rites can be found in the New Testament, nor of the theology accompanying them. In like manner an exaggerated emphasis on the efficacy of the rites and on the materials used led to the practice of applying these rites to infants (p 358). In answer to the question 'Where is the voice of protest against the introduction of infant baptism, if it were a post-Apostolic innovation?' Beasley-Murray asks in turn 'Where is the voice of protest against other blatant accommodations of the Apostolic doctrine of baptism to pagan infiltrating into the Church?' (p 357).

3.6.2 The significance of infant baptism In this last section of this chapter Beasley-Murray asks the question as to whether baptism can possibly have the same significance for infants as it has for those capable of faith and repentance. Can it be the pledge of a good conscience towards God (1 Pet 3.21)? Can it be a burial with Christ henceforth to walk in newness of life (Rom 6.4)? Can it be the washing away of sins (Acts 22.16)? Can it be incorporation into the body of Christ and entrance into the Church? In all these cases Beasley-Murray suggests baptism cannot possibly have the same meaning as it would have for one capable of repentance and faith (p 359-373).

Beasley-Murray then considers the views of those who would acknowledge that infant baptism cannot have exactly the same significance as the baptism of an adult but suggest that in the case of infants baptism must be seen as a promise of salvation. But this would weaken the Apostolic doctrine of baptism which is 'no offer for tomorrow but gift for today - a gift taken in the very act of receiving the rite' (p 376). The same would apply to those who wish to view baptism as a symbolic rather than an instrumental rite. Such a baptism would in effect be *another* baptism to the one practised in the New Testament.

CHAPTER 4

A REFORMED PERSPECTIVE

König, A *Die doop as kinderdoop en grootdoop*

4.1 Some introductory remarks Baptism is one of the things that virtually all Christians have in common, and yet at the same time it is one of the most divisive factors in Christendom. In some groups baptism is emphasised far too excessively and in others far too little. The tremendous discussion that has focused on the issue of infant baptism has meant that much of the wealth of the full meaning of baptism in the New Testament has been sorely neglected.

König points out that in principle there are two forms of baptism in every church, whether they practise infant baptism or not, and these are church baptism (*gemeentedoop*) and missionary baptism (*sendingdoop*). The former refers to the baptism of those born within the church family and growing up in its environment, and the latter refers to the baptism of those coming into the church from a non-Christian background (König 1986:3). The absence of a significant number of missionary baptisms is an unhealthy situation in any church, whether it be one that practises infant baptism or not.

Concerning terminology, König considers the inadequacies of the the terms *kinderdoop* (child baptism) and *grootdoop* (adult baptism) but then decides to use them anyway as there is a general familiarity with these terms and the use of alternative terms would probably only cause confusion. In this English summary of his book, the terms *infant baptism* (or *Paedobaptist*) and *believers' baptism* (or *Baptist*) will be used, not because they are without difficulties, but because there is a general understanding and acceptance of the terms. By infant baptism is meant the practice of baptising the infants of believers, and by believers' baptism is meant the practice of restricting the administration of baptism to those who are able to make a confession of faith.

4.2 The meaning of baptism in the New Testament

4.2.1 Some important basics The New Testament contains a 'high' doctrine of baptism. Baptism is no mere sign or symbol but an efficacious event.

... by baptism we are united with Christ, by baptism we are crucified and raised with Christ, by baptism we are incorporated into the body of Christ and cleansed from our sins. However this 'high' doctrine of baptism is to be understood there can be no doubt of the high value attributed to baptism - much more than a merely symbolic meaning (p 10, translation).

Baptism and salvation are closely connected in the New Testament, indeed, inseparable. At the same time the value and benefits of baptism are always seen *in relation to* the death and resurrection of Christ and *in relation to* faith. Faith and baptism, in particular, are closely connected to one another. Everything attributed to baptism in the New Testament is equally attributed to faith, and vice versa. Indeed, many New Testament references to baptism presuppose faith, just as many references to faith presuppose baptism (p 12-14).

Historically speaking this is easily explainable in the light of the New Testament practice of immediate baptism. This meant, practically, that a person's coming to faith (conversion) and baptism coincided. Therefore to say that baptism washes away our sins is the same as saying Christ washes away our sins through baptism at our conversion. This means that the meaning of baptism is seriously weakened when baptism is postponed and no longer coincides with faith (p 16). Such a postponed or delayed baptism cannot have the full and rich New Testament meaning of baptism but, at the best, can only symbolise and refer to that which has some time before already occurred when the person came to Christ by faith.

4.2.2 Some important meanings of baptism In this section K nig seeks to draw out the full wealth of blessings and benefits associated with baptism in the New Testament: possession by Jesus Christ,

union with the historical Christ, incorporation into the body of Christ (the church), incorporation into the covenant, purification, forgiveness, the reception of the Spirit and regeneration.

Possession of Christ In keeping with the significance of the formula 'in the name of ...' in Hebrew and oriental usage, for someone to be baptised in the name of Jesus meant to become bound to Jesus, to become his possession and to come under his authority (p 19).

Union with the historical Christ Romans 6, the classic chapter on baptism, teaches the union of believers through baptism with Christ in his death and resurrection. This union with the historical Christ in the decisive events of his life must not be limited to his death and resurrection but includes also his ascension, his victory over sin and death and his coming again (p 23).

In Col 2.11-12 also we find reference to believers being buried with Christ in baptism in which they are also raised up with him. This text also mentions the role of faith in this process so that baptism must never be seen as something working automatically, of itself, independent of faith. This text also brings baptism into connection with circumcision. Circumcision had already in the prophets signified the ending of the old life and the beginning of the new life and this is the meaning that Paul now attaches to baptism. So those who have been baptised have already obtained the spiritual meaning of circumcision and therefore have no need to be circumcised (p 25-27).

Col 2-3 also highlights the connection between baptism and ethics. Baptism is the foundation from which all ethical injunctions flow (eg You have died ... therefore put to death ...) (p 28).

In the light of the above, the words of Paul in Gal 2.19-20 'I have been crucified with Christ ...' must not be seen as some kind of self crucifixion or extraordinary commitment but as God's gift in baptism to every believer (p 30).

Incorporation into the church In baptism we are united not only to Christ, but also to the body of Christ, that is, the church. So baptism, then, binds us to Christ and to one another. 'For we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body' (1 Cor 12.13). In baptism the Spirit unites us with the body of Christ. And because the church is the covenant community of God, baptism incorporates us also into the covenant (p 32).

Incorporation into the covenant After speaking about union with Christ in baptism, the apostle Paul makes a significant remark in Gal 3.29, 'If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise'. Thus baptism incorporates us through Christ into the Abrahamic covenant. The covenant God made with Abraham was a covenant of grace, based on faith, and not to be confused with the 'old' covenant, based on law, which was abolished. It is Jesus Christ himself who saves people by incorporating them into the Abrahamic covenant, the covenant of grace (p 35).

Indeed, if Christ incorporates us by baptism into the Abrahamic covenant, a covenant characterised by its inclusion of the children of believers, it is self evident that such children should be baptised just as they were circumcised in the Old Testament (p 37, translation).

This aspect receives further support in the words of Peter on the day of Pentecost: 'Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off - for all whom the Lord our God will call' (Acts 2.38-39). The 'promise' referred to is a reference to the 'promise to the fathers', a technical term for the Abrahamic covenant - the promises God gave to Abraham. This use of 'promise' as a technical term for the Abrahamic covenant is also central to Paul's argument in Rom 4 (p 39).

But why the threefold division in Peter's address: 'you, your children and all who are far off'? The expression 'those who are far off' in New Testament usage is a reference to the Gentiles, those outside the

commonwealth of Israel. So we have here the well known division in which the Abrahamic covenant divides humankind: Abraham, his seed and all the nations of the earth. The Jewish hearers of Peter on the day of Pentecost would certainly have understood the significance of the expression 'you and your children' and its implication that their children, too, should be incorporated into the covenant by baptism. And in keeping with the Abrahamic covenant this would include even small infants (p 41-42).

Just as Abraham and his whole household were taken into the covenant by God, and all of them, including infants, received circumcision, so in the New Testament we read of whole households being taken into the the new covenant through baptism. It has been argued that the households that were baptised could not have included small infants as those same households are also described as rejoicing, believing, serving etc. - activities impossible for an infant. König points out that such expressions always presuppose certain obvious assumptions. For example, the expression 'the family was working in the garden' obviously does not mean babies were working, though they might have been present. But the expression 'the family was killed in an accident' would include infants. So the expression 'the whole household rejoiced' does not necessarily mean there were no infants present, or that such infants had not been baptised. It all depends on what was the normal practice of the apostolic church (p 43-44). König concludes:

In a context where people had been accustomed for centuries to family circumcisions and for at least one century to family baptisms (proselyte baptism), one can hardly doubt that 'he and his house' would have been understood to include infants where infants were actually present (p 46, translation).

Purification There is a significant number of texts in the New Testament that speak of baptism as washing away sins. 'And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptised and wash your sins away, calling on his name' (Acts 22.16). The concept of baptism having the function of washing away sins sounds strange, especially to those in the Evangelical tradition who would insist, as Barth does, that only Jesus can wash away our sins.

Yet there is, in fact, no conflict between the two concepts (purification by Jesus or by baptism). That baptism cleanses us from our sins is but a short way of saying Jesus cleanses us from sins through baptism (p 46-48).

Forgiveness Closely connected to the concept of purification is that of the forgiveness of sins. 'Repent' proclaimed Peter on the day of Pentecost 'and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.' It is not baptism itself, of course, that effects the forgiveness of sins, but baptism together with faith, repentance and the work of Christ. These elements must never be seen as if in opposition to one another, but working together (p 49-51).

The gift of the Spirit and regeneration The fact that baptism is in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the *Holy Spirit* clearly indicates the direct activity of the Spirit in the sacrament of baptism. By the Spirit we are baptised into the body of Christ (1 Cor 12.13) and by the renewal of the Spirit we are saved through the bath of regeneration (Titus 3.5) (p 52).

In considering this rich variety of meanings associated with baptism, König asks the question if any of the different church traditions gives full weight to them all. He suggests that in practice each tradition emphasizes certain meanings while neglecting or even rejecting others. König also stresses that the various meanings of baptism should not be seen in isolation from one another but rather as closely connected to one another. Common to all these meanings is the truth that it is God who acts in baptism. God alone is the one who can work the various benefits and blessings associated with baptism. The one being baptised is passive in this event. One cannot baptise oneself, one *is* baptised. For this reason the practice of infant baptism arises naturally in any discussion about baptism and does not need a separate treatment as some kind of special case of baptism requiring different principles and having different effects. Because it is essentially God who is at work in baptism its meaning is the same in all cases (p 53-57).

4.3 The relationship between the Old and New Testaments

4.3.1 Important - but complicated The fact that the promise to Abraham is coupled to faith in Christ in the New Testament makes it imperative that the relationship between the two Testaments be understood. And it is precisely on this relationship that proponents and adversaries of infant baptism tend to differ, the former stressing the essential continuity between the two Testaments and the latter stressing the radical discontinuity between them (p 60).

4.3.2 Circumcision and baptism It is a mistake, claims König, to see circumcision in the Old Testament as having a purely nationalistic significance, or to suggest that God made two covenants with Abraham, a covenant of grace later fulfilled in Christ and a purely nationalistic covenant of which circumcision was the sign and which has not been continued in Christ. From the beginning circumcision had a deeply religious significance identifying the people of God, a people called to be circumcised in their hearts, referring to spiritual newness of life. Those circumcised in the flesh were thus called to a life of obedience and faith, without which they would be regarded as uncircumcised heathen (p 65-66).

So circumcision is intimately connected to spiritual realities such as faith, conversion, obedience and love. And no one familiar with New Testament baptismal preaching could fail to see the close connection between the meaning of circumcision and the meaning of baptism, although the meaning of baptism is much richer and more diversified than that of circumcision.

In the New Testament there are a number of different perspectives on circumcision ranging from the very positive to the very negative. On the positive side there is a recognition of the spiritual significance of circumcision. In his great chapter on justification by faith (Rom 4) Paul brings together faith, circumcision, and the circumcision of infants. Abraham was justified by faith before he was circumcised, receiving circumcision as 'a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith'

(Rom 4.11). Circumcision was a divine guarantee of his acceptance through faith. It was, therefore, a sacrament of faith. But if it was a sacrament of faith then how could it be given to infants? For them too it was a sacrament of faith. If, after their circumcision, they come to faith, their circumcision has the same value as that of Abraham: a guarantee that God accepts them because they believe (p 72).

An even more direct connection between baptism and circumcision is to be found in Col 2.11-12 where baptism is described as a 'circumcision done by Christ'.

4.3.3 Israel and the church There is an unbroken line between Israel, God's people in the Old Testament, and the church, God's people in the New Testament. Indeed, Israel is the foundation of the church, so that Gentiles become part of God's people only as they become united, in some way, with Israel, God's people of the Old Testament (p 80).

König draws attention to the figure of the olive tree used by Paul to represent the church (Rom 11.16-24):

The trunk of the tree is Israel. The branches represent Jewish and Gentile believers. As branches grow out of the trunk, so the church of the New Testament grows on the church of the Old Testament. The Jews who rejected the Messiah Jesus are like branches of the olive tree that have been broken off. And the Gentiles who received Jesus as Lord are wild branches broken off a wild olive tree and grafted in (contrary to nature! v 24) to the cultivated olive tree (p 81, translation).

4.3.4 The Abrahamic covenant as the covenant of grace It is striking how Paul, especially in Rom 4 and Gal 3-4, uses Abraham as the great model of faith for Christian believers. In his letter to the Galatians Paul teaches that Christ died so that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles. Through baptism we have been united with Christ, and as those who now belong to Christ we have been incorporated into the Abrahamic covenant! (p 84-86).

The suggestion has been made that God made two covenants with Abraham, a spiritual covenant promising the grace of salvation, and a natural covenant promising material blessings such as land and a physical posterity. Such a distinction has no foundation in Scripture in König's view. Indeed, the suggestion of such a distinction shows a serious misunderstanding of the biblical concept of salvation which includes spiritual as well as material dimensions of salvation, and unites them both in a comprehensive vision of *shalom*, summed up in the covenantal formula 'I will be their God and they shall be my people'. Into this Abrahamic covenant Gentiles are incorporated by Christian baptism, and there are simply no grounds for excluding infants from this covenant and its blessings (p 88-91).

4.4 Some important characteristics of the covenant

4.4.1 The covenant as the relationship between God and human beings The essence of a covenant is an agreement between two partners involving mutual obligations. And this remains true of the covenant of grace as certain human responses (repentance, faith) are expected to the divine promises of grace and salvation. But it is a one-sided covenant as in it God takes the initiative not only in freely giving his salvation but also in securing the necessary human response through the work of Jesus Christ on the cross and the work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of his people. This is what makes it a covenant of grace, a grace so amazing that it is called the gospel, the good news of God (p 98-103).

4.4.2 The content of the covenant The covenant is the all embracing relationship between God and human beings in which he accepts responsibility for the totality of their lives (p 104). In this covenant, in which God graciously lives with his people to bless them and save them, there is no room for any artificial division between things spiritual and things natural. God's creation is a unity and human beings are covenant beings, called to live from God and for God. Aspects such as land and posterity are not less worthy or less spiritual aspects of the covenant but of its very essence. The ultimate scope of the covenant is the restoration of all things in the new earth and the new heavens. And it would be strange if children were to be excluded from this. It is of the essence of the

biblical concept of a covenant people of God that his blessings and salvation extend even to the little children, though they are not yet conscious of them.

4.4.3 The one-sidedness of the covenant A covenant has two parties each with responsibilities. But the divine covenant of grace is distinctly one-sided in that God graciously refuses to accept the unfaithfulness and covenant breaking of the human partner and persists with the covenant, ultimately stepping into the shoes of the human partner and as a human being fulfilling himself the human side of the covenant. Indeed, the covenant of grace is the basic structure of God's history with human-kind. Out of his goodness God always takes the initiative, to which people are called to respond. In the New Testament, instead of the usual word for covenant, *sunthéké*, the word *diathéké* occurs, often used to mean a 'testament', something definitely one-sided and which can only be received (p 107-112).

If one of the functions of baptism is incorporation into the covenant, it would be expected that baptism, too, should show something of the one-sidedness of the covenant. And this is the case in that baptism refers essentially to what God does for human beings, and not vice versa. People are passive in baptism. They are baptised, they do not baptise themselves. Again we see the emphasis on God taking the initiative and doing something graciously for us to which we must respond. And if this is the case then children, too, can be baptised. They are, like anyone else, the recipients of God's grace, to which they later must respond, as all must do who have been baptised. In this sense every baptism is an infant baptism, even though the one being baptised is eighty years old (p 114), because in every baptism it is God who takes the initiative to which we later respond.

4.4.4 The corporative character of the covenant Under the influence of modern Western culture great emphasis has been placed on God's personal and direct dealings with individuals. This is, of course, quite correct. But what has often been neglected is the equally important truth that God also deals corporately with groups, such as Israel and the church. The reality of the corporative nature of human existence means that

the history of redemption can be summed up in key persons such as Adam and Christ. In Adam we all sinned. In Christ we have all been justified and raised to newness of life. In Abraham God promised to bless all the families of the earth (p 115-119).

In Christ we have been reconciled - not only when we were still infants, but even before we were born. In Christ we have been incorporated into the Abrahamic covenant. Equally true, however, is that without faith we can reckon on none of these things (p 120, translation).

4.4.5 Children in the covenant It has already been pointed out that the blessings of the covenant are comprehensive: spiritual and material, earthly and heavenly. And these blessings, to some extent at least, are corporately enjoyed. Christ loved the church, his body, and gave himself for it. When parents belonging to this body have a baby, the baby naturally and obviously becomes part of this community of salvation. As the Lord blesses the parents, the infant shares in these blessings, which are the blessings of the covenant.

For this reason the children of believers in the Old Testament were circumcised and in the New Testament they were baptised as a confirmation of God's promises to them... for whenever God begins to bless believers, their children have a share in these blessings. And because baptism is also an incorporation into the covenant of grace, the children of believers need to be baptised as their incorporation into this body or community of people blessed by God, of which the children obviously form a part (p 122, translation).

4.5 Baptism, then and now

4.5.1 The 'poverty' of the New Testament König points out that the New Testament cannot be seen as some kind of blueprint to be imitated by churches today. It is neither desirable nor possible to reconstitute the New Testament church today. Nor does the Bible provide us with ready made solutions and answers for all our problems and questions.

It is our task, rather, to study the Bible so as to grasp those principles that we must apply to our situation, with the same faith, hope and love as motivated the early Christians (p 124-127).

In a certain sense the New Testament is 'poorer' than the Old Testament, being written over a much shorter period and covering a much shorter history. Yet even within the scope of this short period certain developments can be discerned. As new situations in the church arise, new applications of the meaning of the gospel are required. And this has important implications for baptismal practice. Concerning baptism, says König, it is impossible to restore precisely the situation of the apostles (p 128).

4.5.2 The historical context of baptism in the NT
Because of the 'poverty', or limitations, of the New Testament, mentioned above, there are many issues that are not addressed directly or exhaustively in the New Testament (eg the Sabbath/Sunday issue, the ordination of women, the two natures of Christ, the Trinity). There are also no clear instructions on how the children of believers should be received into the church, whether they should be baptised as infants or as young children or as adults. This only became a problem after the New Testament was written, so that whatever conclusions churches come to today, they are conclusions that have been derived from the principles of the New Testament rather than from any undisputable statement (p 128-130).

Indeed, there are quite a few questions concerning baptism to which the New Testament gives no clear answer. Were the 120 who received the Spirit on the day of Pentecost all baptised? Was everyone who came to faith after Pentecost necessarily baptised? Why are only eight baptisms mentioned specifically in the book of Acts, though thousands were converted? And why are all the baptisms mentioned in the New Testament missionary baptisms, that is, the baptism of those coming into the church from outside, as opposed to those born within the community of faith? (p 132).

Perhaps part of the answer to the above questions can be found in the fact that the early church lived and worked in the lively expectation of the

imminent return of the Lord Jesus. And in the light of this expectation attention was focused on the mission of the church and on missionary baptisms, rather than on church baptisms, that is, the baptism of those growing up within the church.

At this point, König directs some pertinent questions to those who reject the practice of infant baptism. Do they administer baptism exactly as it was in the NT, where baptism was administered immediately to those desiring it so that faith and baptism were, for all practical purposes, simultaneous? It is impossible to postpone baptism without changing its meaning. Someone united to Christ by faith cannot afterwards be united to Christ by baptism. It is only when faith and baptism occur simultaneously that the full NT meaning of baptism can be preserved. The delay of baptism brings radical changes in its meaning. So those who reject infant baptism cannot so easily claim that they follow the NT practice. In most cases they practice a delayed baptism, baptising believers after (sometimes a considerable time after) they have come to faith (p 133-136).

4.5.3 A theology of the child In this section König continues to ask some searching questions about children and their relationship to God, their parents and the church. Are believers' children in any way part of the church? Or are they to be regarded as non-Christians? Do they come to faith in the same way as adults? And why do churches that reject infant baptism not baptise their children as soon as they come to believe in Jesus?

Some of the most complex questions are concerned with the spiritual state of children who die as infants. Are they saved? And if so, on what basis? Are they saved because they have no sin? Or are they sinners saved by grace and the regeneration of the Holy Spirit? Baptists holding to the second view would explain that while faith is normally a condition for salvation, in the case of infants who cannot yet believe, God can grant them the grace of salvation without faith. But if infants can be saved without faith, why can they not be baptised without faith? (p 138-140).

Churches which reject infant baptism often experience considerable confusion concerning the position of their children in the church. König points with approval to the conclusions of the Baptist scholar, Honeycutt, who affirms that in the Old Testament as well as in the New, the children of believers are children of the covenant, born within the community of faith and growing up in this faith. The only decision they must make is to remain within this covenant or to deliberately leave it. Indeed, König points out, it is inconsistent to bring any separation between salvation, the covenant of grace, Christ and the church. Children receiving salvation belong to the body of Christ, the church, and ought to be incorporated into it by baptism (p 141-145).

If one wanted to follow strictly the pattern of those baptisms recorded in the New Testament it would be necessary to baptise persons immediately they came to faith. But in the case of children growing up in the church, how does one determine that moment? Indeed, König emphasizes again, in the case of children of believers it is simply not possible to baptise them in exactly the same way as in the NT. And the practice of churches which reject infant baptism confirms this, where baptism is delayed even after the coming to faith of the child. Such a delayed baptism cannot have the significance of incorporation into Christ, his death, burial and resurrection because these have already happened. This is why in such churches the tendency is to reduce the meaning of baptism to a mere symbol of our union with Christ (p 155-156).

In concluding this section König stresses that aspect of baptism he feels must always be held in view: that in baptism it is God who acts for the salvation of the one being baptised (p 157). In response to those who maintain that infant baptism is a baptism 'too early' and therefore subject to the same criticisms as those levelled against 'delayed' baptism, König replies that if baptism is a saving act of God, and if God also permits children a share in his salvation, then they ought to be baptised (p 160).

4.5.4 Baptism today - a Babylonian confusion? Again König points out that in every church there are, in reality, two forms of baptism: church baptism and missionary baptism. The former refers to the

baptism of those who have grown up in the church or who have come to the church from another church. The latter refers to the baptism of those who have come to Christ and the church from outside the Christian faith. And it is a disturbing fact, claims König, that the great majority of baptisms being practised in most churches, whether they practise only believers' baptism or also infant baptism, are church baptisms. It is disturbing, says König, because any Christian church ought to be baptising more non-Christians than children from the church (or people from other churches). Indeed, without an abundance of missionary baptisms, church baptisms (be they of infants or adults) lose their meaning. A dearth of missionary baptisms is a tragic sign that the church is stagnating and no more functioning in its deepest calling - to be the light of the world. It is possibly a sign of the vitality and growth of the early church that no attention is given to the subject of church baptisms in the New Testament (p 165).

The theological problems associated with delayed baptisms have already been pointed out above. König goes on to say that delayed baptism is not only the practice of those churches which baptise their children long after their coming to faith but is also the rule for the missionary baptisms carried out by virtually all churches, as they all require a period of instruction before baptism.

The New Testament order for missionary baptisms (faith, baptism, catechesis) has been changed to faith, catechesis, baptism. This has resulted in the same problems of meaning for delayed missionary baptisms as is the case for delayed church baptisms (p 165, translation).

König draws attention to the rite of 'the celebration of baptism' which some churches have developed for those who have fallen away from the church and its faith and have been restored again by a conversion experience and who need to give expression to this experience in a suitable rite. While noting some theological problems with the concept König is sympathetic to the idea as an honest attempt to deal with the confused situation in church life today.

Turning his attention to the highly sensitive issue of rebaptism, König notes, firstly, that those churches that practice believers' baptism (and imply by that phrase the rejection of infant baptism) do not see themselves as practising rebaptism as they do not recognise the validity of infant baptism. Many of them, too, reject rebaptism. The practice of rebaptising people without necessarily taking them into church membership aggravates the situation even further. In König's view those churches rejecting infant baptism need to ask themselves if the practice of rebaptism (as other churches see it) is not too costly in terms of the damage done to inter-church relationships. He cites the case of the Dutch Reformed churches in South Africa which have been prejudiced against the Charismatic renewal because of its association, in their eyes, with the practice of indiscriminate rebaptisms. König also points out that some outstanding theologians who are critical of infant baptism (eg Karl Barth) do not favour rebaptism, preferring to recognise infant baptism as a valid, though defective baptism.

Having addressed a question to those who practise rebaptism, concerning the damage thereby done to inter-church relationships, König then addresses some questions to those churches which reject rebaptism: In exercising discipline and excommunication against those who have been rebaptised, are they not guilty of over reacting and thereby perhaps making a mockery of ecclesiastical discipline and excommunication? Is rebaptism really such a serious matter? Are not the motives of those being rebaptised often sincere and upright, however deficient their understanding? Would it not be more effective in dealing with such people to show sympathy and understanding? Indeed, would it not be more helpful to see their rebaptism simply as a renewal or celebration of their (infant) baptism? (p 176-183).

König notes with sadness the contentiousness, bitterness and condemnatory spirit that so often characterises baptismal discussion. Is there no possibility, he asks, of mutual recognition in the matter of baptismal practices? In some Baptist churches, for example, there is a policy of 'open membership' which does not insist on the rebaptism of those joining the church. Recent discussions between the World Baptist Alliance and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches resulted in a report with some helpful

comments, such as: *'The Reformed emphasis on the priority of God's grace in baptism and the Baptist accent on man's active participation in the baptismal event are, in a sense, complementary ...'* (p 185). A document produced by *Faith and Order* also fosters a positive appreciation of the intentions and concerns of Baptists and Paedobaptists.

Could there be a dual baptismal practice within the one church? This would allow parents to baptise their infants or to wait until they were older. The proposal bristles with theological difficulties. Would adults desiring rebaptism be free to receive it? Is it really possible, in matters concerning baptism, for people to be completely free to follow their own convictions? Those not baptised as infants, for example, obviously have no freedom later to receive infant baptism if they should become convinced of that position. König is doubtful about the merits of a dual baptismal policy, but does not rule out entirely the possibility (p 188-191).

4.5.5 The meaning of baptism today Again König emphasises that baptism is primarily God's work. This is why in the New Testament so little is explained to baptismal candidates about baptism before the administration of baptism. Only afterwards is the meaning explained in greater detail. Because it is God who acts in baptism, it is not so important for the candidate to know much about it before the time. Having said this, König immediately guards against the idea of baptism working anything by itself, apart from the Word, the Spirit and faith. These are all ways in which God administers his salvation, and this administration is a unity (p 193).

Equally, König maintains, baptism is not necessary for salvation in the sense that without it something is missing that can in no other way be obtained, just as the Word and faith are not indispensable in an absolute way for salvation - as in the case of small babies, for example. But although God is not dependent on baptism in his saving activity, yet it remains the normal way of salvation, together with the proclamation of the Word and its reception in faith by the grace of the Holy Spirit.

We may and ought to see our baptism as the way in which God gives his salvation to us and as the foundation from which we can resist service to sin and live completely for God.... In faith we may see our baptism as our union with Christ, the ending of our old life and our resurrection to newness of life in Christ (p 197, translation).

4.5.6 Objections to infant baptism König's book is primarily a book on baptism in general rather than a defence of infant baptism. So he has not given particular attention to some of the arguments against infant baptism. In this section he briefly considers some of them.

Jesus was baptised as an adult. He was also circumcised, crucified, poor and celibate. Our following Christ cannot be a literal imitation in all these things.

There is no text in the Bible for infant baptism. In fact there is no text that deals with the subject of the baptism of the children of believers. In this matter deductions must be made from biblical principles, as is the case in so many other matters, such as the Trinity and the Sunday/Sabbath issue. The Bible is not an encyclopedia from which we can read out simple answers to every issue (p 201).

The biblical order is first faith, then baptism. For those coming from outside into the covenant community, yes. And this was true of the Old Testament, too. Abraham first believed and then was circumcised. And so it continued for all coming to faith from the Gentiles. But in the case of children born within the covenant, the order was reversed; first circumcision, then faith (p 202).

There is no connection between baptism and circumcision. Circumcision was administered only to males. And the Jewish Christians continued to circumcise their children so that baptism and circumcision existed as two separate rites in the early Jewish church. The first part of this objection has no weight as it presupposes far too close an identity between the two rites. Concerning the second, it is understandable that in a transition period circumcision would continue for a while (where it did not conflict

with the gospel) until its relationship to baptism gradually became clearer. There was a similar transition period in the relationship between the Christian church and the temple sacrificial system (p 203-205).

Immersion or sprinkling? There is little in the New Testament concerning the mode of baptism. While sprinkling and immersion are both suitable as modes of baptism, sprinkling, in König's view, is preferable as it corresponds to various Old Testament purification rites which in turn relate to baptism. Immersion is alien to the Old Testament and it is not certain whether there are any cases of immersion in the New Testament. Neither does immersion correspond to the burial and resurrection of Christ as Christ was not buried vertically, under the ground, but horizontally (p 206-214).

The final chapter of König's book consists of a dialogue with various scholars who have written on baptism from the perspective of believers' baptism (understood as a rejection of infant baptism), but this will not be summarized here.

CHAPTER 5

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

5.1 The need for understanding The last three chapters contain a fairly comprehensive summary of three different perspectives on baptism. This was deliberately placed at the beginning of this thesis that the reader may be acquainted afresh with the carefully reasoned arguments put forward in favour of different points of view. Reading alone, however, is of no value unless it is accompanied by a determined effort to gain a sympathetic understanding of points of view other than our own. It is a fallacy to think that we can come to any text with a completely open mind. Our minds are far from open. They are loaded with a whole mass of preconceptions and convictions. Therefore a very special effort is needed to really understand other points of view, as everything within us inclines us against upsetting our mental equilibrium by giving serious consideration to viewpoints that clash with our own. Hence much that goes under the name of reading and research is, in truth, an exercise in fault finding, designed to bolster our own position rather than seriously search for truth. The comment of the Anglican scholar, Dr Jenkins, in the context of a dialogue on baptism is appropriate here:

...this is a place for patient and humble discussion where it is important that each side puts the best interpretation possible on the views of the other, recognising the truth of the assertion that we are likely to be right in what we affirm and wrong in what we deny ... and I am sure that if we are humble and receptive and charitable the Lord will look kindly upon our perplexities and lead us together into deeper truth (Jenkins 1965:59).

The role played by emotion in effectively blocking meaningful access to other points of view was pointed out by König in his opening address to a congress on infant baptism hosted by the UNISA department of Systematic Theology:

Who is going to win - those who advocate infant baptism or those who oppose it? Or is it by any chance Jesus Christ's approach that is going to win - the approach of Christian tolerance in the midst of our differences? ... The emotionally charged atmosphere surrounding baptism makes it exceedingly difficult for us all to be influenced by even the best arguments of the other group. Emotion forms a barrier around one's thought and can make one totally inaccessible to other points of view (König 1984:1).

One of the first steps needed in order to make meaningful progress in understanding baptismal differences is to move away from the too simplistic categories of right and wrong, especially when applied to whole perspectives such as outlined in chapters 2-4. That is why this chapter is entitled 'Strengths and Weaknesses'. It is far more helpful to analyse a position to discover its strong and weak points. This approach has been emphasized by the Roman Catholic teacher and author Francis MacNutt:

Proponents of adult baptism are not wrong; we need to see that. Nor are proponents of infant baptism wrong; others need to see that. We do not want a watering down of truth to bring us together at the lowest common denominator. We need to come to a level higher, where both truths can be joined without compromise to either position (MacNutt 1984:161).

At first glance MacNutt's approach might seem to be an attempt to avoid the real issues and to achieve some kind of cheap reconciliation by simply declaring everyone correct. Yet he is at pains to point out that he is not interested in any watering down of the truth. On the contrary he is concerned to grasp the truth in greater fullness, and the greatest obstacles in this process are prejudice, preconceptions and dogmatic inflexibility.

At the heart of this thesis on 'Baptism, Reconciliation and Unity' lies the conviction that unity and truth are not opposed to one another, as if unity can only be achieved at the expense of truth, or as if adherence to the truth will necessarily bring division. Rather, it is the case that unity

and truth are intimately bound up with one another so that it is only in a commitment to unity that we find true freedom to pursue the truth. As the Irish Jesuit priest Declan Deane has observed:

Christ through the Holy Spirit guides his followers towards the fullness of truth. In any given instance, disunity among Christ's followers is liable to frustrate and retard the process whereby divine truth is communicated and received.... it is only insofar as the disciples commit themselves to being one, that they can win the inner freedom of mind and heart to be 'dedicated' to the truth. Without a hard-won unity of hearts and minds, truth can only remain a chimera (Deane 1987: 54-55).

In the remainder of this chapter the attempt will be made to reflect critically on the content of the previous three chapters, not to try and ascertain who is right or wrong, but to probe and explore and test the various approaches with a view to discovering areas of strengths and weaknesses. There will also be an attempt to try and understand the basic concerns that underlie the various perspectives, the often unstated psychological motivations that play a powerful, even if unrecognised, role in maintaining and buttressing theological positions. There are, of course, considerable areas of overlap and these will be noted as well as the areas of difference. Each perspective is concerned to preserve something they consider vital and precious, something so important that it cannot and may not be lost to the Christian world. What is this essence, so important that many have been willing to sacrifice life and limb to preserve it? That is what we are concerned to discover and sympathetically understand in this thesis.

It cannot be ignored that the writer of these lines is not some completely impartial observer (if, indeed, such a creature exists) but a Baptist. Therefore, as was pointed out in the introduction, no claim to impartiality is made. The eyes of the observer (and the spectacles through which those eyes look) determine to a large extent what is seen. But the recognition of this reality by the observer can lead to certain correctives being deliberately applied. So the Baptist reader of this chapter (and thesis)

must not be surprised to find the Baptist perspective the target of some of the sharpest criticisms made.

5.2 Strengths

5.2.1 Introduction It will be instructive, right at the beginning, to note the very considerable degree of overlap in the three views considered. All three of the authors considered hold to a sacramental view of baptism, maintaining that baptism is more than just a symbol but that in baptism God does something to the recipient of the sacrament. Now this is not surprising in the case of the Catholic perspective, as Catholic theology is strongly sacramental in its essence. Neither is it all that strange for a Reformed perspective as that tradition, from the time of Calvin, has had a sacramental element to it. But it is unusual for a Baptist as the Baptist tradition has tended to be anti-sacramental, preferring to speak of the ordinance of baptism and believing it to be largely of symbolic value.

Furthermore, each author strongly emphasises the importance of faith and its connection to baptism, so that the efficacy of baptism and the benefits bestowed in and through baptism cannot be considered in isolation from faith and the central role it plays in God's dealings with human beings.

Finally it can be said that not one of the authors has any doubts about the primacy of divine grace in the process of human salvation. It is God who takes the initiative in reaching out to fallen and helpless sinners in graciously granting them his salvation and life, and each author agrees that this reality must be manifest in baptism, the sacrament of life and salvation. So we note right at the beginning the very important areas of overlap in the viewpoints under consideration.

5.2.2 Catholic strengths in Walsh's position Biblical language about baptism is strongly realistic. Something happens in baptism. People are born anew, regenerated by the Holy Spirit, cleansed from their sins, incorporated into the body of Christ. And it is this 'high' sacramental understanding of baptism that Walsh's Catholic theology is

concerned to maintain and uphold. Any watering down of the meaning of baptism that makes it a mere symbol, ineffectual of itself, or perhaps even dispensable or optional is strongly resisted by Walsh and by Catholic theology in general. Such would be to detract from the dignity of the sacrament instituted by Christ himself to be the means of appropriating the grace and salvation he offers to human beings. For this reason Walsh takes very seriously the failure to ask for or to administer baptism. Although he does not endorse the stricter Augustinian view of the necessary damnation of the unbaptised, he cannot accept any tendency to treat baptism as optional and not really necessary for salvation. The consequences of deliberately neglecting baptism are serious.

More than König or Beasley-Murray, Walsh devotes considerable attention to the historical development of baptismal thinking and practice. This coincides with the general Catholic approach in which the views of the great church fathers carry weight and are taken very seriously. Catholic theologians, such as Walsh, put great importance on the maxim of 'thinking with the church'. Christ promised that the Holy Spirit would be given to the church to guide her in all truth. Therefore the whole of the Christian tradition must be taken seriously as summing up the church's reflection, under the guidance of the Spirit, on the truths of the gospel. Of course there will inevitably be distortions in the views of individual teachers, even with such great luminaries as an Augustine or an Aquinas. And there is unquestionably a process of development and progress as the church continues its reflection on the faith once received and struggles to understand and apply it more perfectly in the changing context of the society to which it ministers. But this is the strength of Catholic theology - its catholicity, its conviction that vital truth is not imparted to some individual in isolation but rather emerges as the consensus of the faithful striving together for the faith of the gospel, and not only the faithful of the present generation but the faithful of all generations as they constitute together the whole catholic church, militant and triumphant. For this reason Walsh gives more attention than König and Beasley-Murray to the teachings of the Fathers and the Councils of the church and is careful that his exposition of the doctrine of baptism should not be seen as a contradiction of those teachings but rather as a

legitimate and authentic development of them. For a catholic theologian like Walsh it is unthinkable that the church today could come to conclusions in some important area of doctrine that were a flat contradiction of the teaching of the church in the past. That would be to call into question the promises made by Christ to his church concerning the abiding presence of his Spirit in the church. This 'thinking with the church' is surely a strength, in line with the truth that the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, has been given to the whole catholic church, the body of all faithful people, past and present, so that that which has been held *semper, ubique, ab omnibus* (always, everywhere, by all) represents the true Christian doctrine.

It must not be thought, however, that Walsh is some antiquarian, content merely to repeat the formulations of the past and perhaps to codify them for present use. On the contrary there is a freshness and contemporary ring to his writings that shows a thorough acquaintance with the contemporary discussion around baptism. The second Vatican Council has been a profound watershed event in the recent development of Catholic theology, and Walsh's work has been written completely in the spirit of Vatican II and its aim of reinterpreting and restating the Catholic faith so as to be able to speak to the modern world with new power, vigour and relevance. In this way Walsh has been able to work into his treatise on baptism modern insights derived from the fields of psychology and sociology, thereby throwing new light on old truths.

Finally it must be mentioned that there is a consistency to Walsh's baptismal teaching. The biblical elements of the divine action, the regeneration of the Spirit and the human response of faith and repentance are always present in baptism. The baptism of children and infants is grounded, like the baptism of adults, in faith, not only the faith of the individual but also the faith of the church of which the individual is a part (Walsh 1988:101). A strongly corporate concept of the family (both ecclesial and social) enables Walsh to envisage the reality of family corporate decisions for Christ which bring the whole family, including infants, into a new relationship with God and secure for the whole family, including infants and small children whose personal understanding of these

things is necessarily limited, the blessing of God which is life and salvation. Children born to Christian families within the wider family of the church are part of the community of faith. It is the desire of the church that they should be saved, and the faith of the church that God accepts these little ones through Jesus Christ, and the commitment of the church to bring them up in the fear and knowledge of the Lord. On the basis of this faith and commitment they are incorporated into Christ and the church through baptism. As a result they are not strangers and aliens in the bosom of the church but fellow citizens and members of the household of God.

5.2.3 Baptist strengths in Beasley-Murray's position

Like Walsh and König, Beasley-Murray holds to a sacramental view of baptism. That is, baptism is more than just a symbol of the various blessings bestowed by God on human beings through faith in Jesus Christ but it is an efficacious symbol whereby those blessings are actually procured. Baptism into Christ secures for the one receiving the sacrament the forgiveness of sins, the gift of the Spirit, incorporation into Christ and the church. The reason why Beasley-Murray is able to affirm so strongly the efficacy of baptism is because in its essence it is an act of faith and faith is efficacious. Baptist theology ties baptism and the personal believing of the one being baptised indissolubly together and allows of no exceptions to this rule, so that the essential elements of a valid baptism consist not only of a washing in water in the name of Jesus Christ but also a profession of faith by the one being baptised.

There is a certain simplicity to the Baptist view of making baptism a confession of personal faith. But it is precisely this simplicity which is its strength. It requires no theological sophistication to understand, which is perhaps a reason for its powerful appeal to so many ordinary people possessed of a strong desire to follow Christ but having little formal theological training. This tying together of baptism and personal faith establishes a strong foundation for baptism and any benefits ascribed to it, as the whole Bible speaks so powerfully and extensively of the benefits of faith. There are relatively few references in the New Testament to the rite of baptism while the centrality of faith stands out on every

page, almost every line. There is dispute among theologians concerning the precise effects of baptism, but there can be no dispute concerning the role of repentance and faith in securing the blessing, deliverance and salvation of God. For this reason Baptist theology has always felt that to ascribe anything to baptism where baptism is not an act of repentance towards God and faith in Jesus Christ is likely to detract from the centrality and importance of faith of which the whole Bible testifies so abundantly and unmistakably.

It is agreed by all three authors and by Christian scholars in general that there are no cases of infant baptism as such explicitly recorded in the New Testament and that all those instances of baptism actually recorded involve people who could exercise faith and repentance. This means that Baptist theologians can point to the various instances of baptism recorded in the Scriptures as models of believers' baptism without having to make various inferences derived from certain theological principles in order to justify any part of their baptismal practice.

Not only in the recorded instances of baptism but also in those parts of the New Testament where there is teaching about baptism it is always connected to faith. This is perhaps the reason why Beasley-Murray's book on baptism consists largely of the careful exegesis of every text in the New Testament that mentions or even alludes to baptism. It is clearly his conviction that the plain exegesis of the New Testament passages that deal with baptism will establish beyond reasonable doubt that baptism is always believers' baptism and that there can be no exception to this rule.

5.2.4 Reformed strengths in König's position Just as Walsh is concerned to think with the church, seeking to define the doctrine of baptism as it has been taught and practised in the historic Christian church guided by the Holy Spirit down the ages, and just as Beasley-Murray has sought to carefully expound all the baptismal texts in the New Testament, so König is concerned to develop an understanding of baptism that is in accord with the whole Bible, the fullness of God's revelation to his people, and its basic teaching of how God relates to human beings and

grants his salvation and blessings to them. And this is the strength of his Reformed perspective.

'All Scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching ...' (2 Tim 3.16) and as König reminds us the much greater part of this Scripture is what we call the Old Testament. Doctrines claiming to be biblical ought in most cases to be able to draw on this large corpus of divine revelation covering the history of God's dealings with his people over a long period of time. Indeed the very brevity of the New Testament both in its actual content and in the time span it covers constitutes a limitation of sorts. It is quite impossible to expect such a short document to provide explicit answers to every conceivable doctrinal and practical problem arising in the church in various places and at different times. Indeed, it is a deficient hermeneutical approach to regard the Bible as a handbook out of which can be read the answers to all our theological questions. A much sounder hermeneutic is that which sees the Bible as a record of God's self revelation to his people and containing those principles which can guide us in our service of God and our fellow human beings.

One of the primary concepts in God's dealings with human beings to which the whole Bible bears witness is the concept of the covenant, the covenant of grace. König devotes a significant section of his book on baptism to explaining the significance of the covenant and its implications for baptism. According to this covenant God is making a people for himself. God called Abraham and promised to bless him and to make his descendants into a great nation through whom all the families of the earth would be blessed. 'I will be your God and you will be my people' is the essence of the divine promise and the covenant of grace. And the promises made by God to Abraham extend right through to the New Testament so that Paul saw the blessing of salvation coming to the Gentiles through faith in Jesus Christ to be the fulfilment of the Abrahamic covenant.

It is this fundamental unity of the whole Bible, of the Abrahamic covenant and the covenant of grace which König seeks to underline and which is a strength of his position. The covenant community is and always has been a community of faith. Anyone entering this community from the outside must

profess faith and cannot be sacramentally incorporated into the community without faith, whether it be by circumcision (as in the OT) or by baptism (as in the NT). But the children born into this community are undeniably in a special position. They are not pagans worshipping strange gods from which they must turn to the living and true God. They are part of a community of faith growing up to believe and follow the truth. They are not strangers and aliens to the commonwealth of the people of God - either in the OT or in the NT. They are the holy seed of a holy people. So as they were incorporated into the covenant at birth through circumcision in the Old Testament it is natural and proper for them to be incorporated into the covenant community today by baptism. This is in keeping with the unity of God's dealings with his people from the time of Abraham, the father of all believers, up to these last days. König makes the point that it would have been impossible for the first Christians (who were almost all Jews) not to have been influenced by a covenantal way of thinking so deeply ingrained in the Jewish mentality and formed over a history of two thousand years. It is this integrated theological approach to baptism grounded in the covenant of grace and the unity of the Bible that constitutes the strength of König's approach.

5.3 Weaknesses

5.3.1 Introduction The pattern of theological debate is often to focus on the weakness of the opponent's arguments while giving no serious consideration to our own. In this way theological debate can continue forever as it becomes a crusade to defend the truth against error, with each protagonist firmly entrenched in his or her citadel of truth periodically firing off broadsides against the opponents in error. But weak points can be found in every position including our own. Just as we have broadly sketched some of the strengths of the three perspectives under consideration we shall now outline some of their weaknesses, primarily as seen through the eyes of the writer. It must be emphasized that what follows is not an attempt to enumerate *all* the weaknesses of a particular viewpoint but rather an attempt to draw attention to just one or two areas which could be regarded as weak points - perhaps even by proponents of a particular viewpoint.

5.3.2 Catholic weaknesses in Walsh's position It is agreed by all Christian traditions that the practice of indiscriminate baptism is unacceptable and in fact virtually all the great churches have taken steps to eliminate the practice. In his work Walsh also emphasized the importance of faith, and that baptism can only be given where faith is active, whether it be the faith of the individual being baptised or the faith of the parents and sponsors bringing an infant to baptism. Yet Walsh also speaks of the 'urgency that sometimes borders on the reckless' with which the church administers the sacrament of baptism, and a 'generosity that is always prepared to give the benefit of the doubt. For it is believed to be the gift of a God who wishes all to be saved by it' (Walsh 1988:88). Between this generosity in the administration of baptism and the acknowledgment of the evil consequences of indiscriminate baptism, surely Catholics find themselves in a difficult dilemma. How can baptism be withheld from an infant on the grounds that the parents are not practising Catholics? In the light of the high sacramental understanding of baptism maintained by Catholic theology, to withhold baptism is to withhold the sacrament of regeneration and salvation. Would it not be cruel to so penalise a helpless infant on account of the shortcomings of the parents? Because this is how such actions are invariably seen by such parents. Would not such an action only serve to anger and further alienate such parents who will feel offended that the church is willing to deprive their child of an essential sacrament? Such considerations put an unbearable pressure on the church and make it virtually impossible, in practice, to refuse baptism to infants brought by parents who are not practising Christians and who are living in a sinful estrangement from the church and its teaching. This guarantees the perpetuation of the cycle of indiscriminate baptism, with the church regularly initiating infants into a defective Christianity which is contrary to the church's own standards - a Christianity characterised by the norm of non-observance and neglect of the church's teaching and concerned only with the maintenance of a nominal connection with the church through baptism.

The whole situation is aggravated even further by the rivalry which exists between churches and the practice of indiscriminate proselytism in which one church does not hesitate to proselytise members of another church. It

is hard for a church to exercise disciplinary steps against an erring member knowing full well that that member can easily transfer to a rival church. This demonstrates again the urgency of the concern behind the title of this thesis 'Baptism, reconciliation and unity'. But for the moment we are considering some Catholic weaknesses, and many would consider that it is a weakness of Catholic baptismal doctrine and practice that it would be seen to be virtually guaranteeing indiscriminate baptism in practice. Many would argue that this is also a consequence of too 'high' a doctrine of baptism which exalts the dignity of the sacrament and its alleged powers and benefits at the expense of personal, intelligent faith.

5.3.3 Baptist weaknesses in Beasley-Murray's position In an article on Baptist theology the British Baptist scholar Keith Clements makes the following remark in his closing sentence: 'Baptists have also yet to arrive at an agreed theology of children in the church' (Clements 1989:62). This remark highlights the feeling shared by many, including some Baptists, that the chief weakness in Baptist theology is precisely their theology of children. Beasley-Murray, in his lengthy treatise on baptism in the New Testament, does not really touch on the issue of the children of believers and their relationship to God and the church. Part of the reason for this is that his book consists primarily of the exegesis of baptismal texts in the New Testament which admittedly deal with the baptism of those capable of faith and repentance. But even in his chapter entitled 'The doctrine of Christian Baptism in the New Testament' there is no mention of the issue of the children of believers, which leaves a whole host of questions simply unanswered. What is the relationship of such children to God? Are they saved? And if they are saved, on what basis are they saved? Are they without sin? Or have they been made children of God by the grace of the Holy Spirit? And if they are saved, as most Baptists indeed believe, why are they then not baptised as members of the saved community? If small infants can be saved without exercising personal faith, why can they also not be baptised without exercising personal faith?

In addition to questions concerning the relationship of small children to God there are also important questions concerning the relation of such children to the church. How do Baptists regard their own children; as

Christian children or non-Christian children? How do they relate to them, as to Christians or to non-Christians? Do they teach them that they are 'separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world' (Eph 2.12), or do they teach them to pray to God as 'our Father', to trust in him, to love him and serve him as children of God? The answer is almost certainly the latter, which shows that Baptists in practice treat their own children as covenant children. But if they are covenant children why are they excluded from the sacrament of the covenant of grace, baptism?

Another aspect of believers' baptism that is perceived by many to be a weakness is that in practice it tends to become delayed baptism. Rather than being administered at the point of turning to God in faith, in practice baptism is given some time after that point. In the case of children born to Christian parents the administration of baptism can be many years after coming to faith. The same is true when converts from other churches are (re)baptised. One consequence of this practice is that baptism is held to be largely of symbolic value, symbolising those gifts and blessings already previously received by the candidate at the point of coming to Christ in faith. Now admittedly Beasley-Murray is aware of the anomalies of such a delayed baptism and he tries to counteract these by insisting on the sacramental nature of baptism as well as by urging that baptism should be made integral to conversion. However he still envisages a delay between conversion and baptism and speaks in favour of an extended catechumenate (Beasley-Murray 1962:394). And as for the question as to when children born to Christian parents should be baptised (seeing they are taught to believe from the beginning), Beasley-Murray does not in any way address that issue.

A final critique of the Baptist position that will just be mentioned here (to be taken up later in this thesis) is this: if baptism does not function in reality as the initiatory rite of incorporation into Christ and the church then other rites must be devised to serve that function. And this, in fact, is what has happened. Among Baptists (and among Evangelical Protestants in general who all tend to view baptism symbolically rather than sacramentally) the 'real' way to become a Christian is by an act of

faith crystallised in some or other evangelical rite (saying the sinner's prayer, inviting the Lord to come into your heart, responding to an altar call, etc.). This is, in effect, simply the substitution of a modern rite of salvation for a biblical rite. Whatever practical and functional validity such rites might well have in contemporary times, one unfortunate result is that those who believe they became Christians by baptism are regarded with suspicion or, more likely, as being deceived.

5.3.4 Reformed weaknesses in König's position In his book König draws attention to the fact that New Testament baptisms were administered immediately (*gou, direk*), apparently the same day and hour in which the candidate came to faith (König 1987:135). This would be the reason why the blessings of redemption are attributed equally to faith or baptism. But this would no longer be the case if there were to be a significant gap between coming to faith and baptism. If the candidate is united to Christ through faith and through baptism it is impossible, in König's view, to postpone baptism without changing its meaning (König 1987:135). It is on this basis that König argues strongly (and correctly in the writer's view) that a delayed baptism cannot have the full and rich meaning which New Testament baptism has. But surely the same criticism can be brought against infant baptism. In the case of an infant, personal faith is clearly impossible which means there is necessarily a gap between baptism and coming to faith. Surely that must lead to the conclusion that infant baptism, like delayed baptism, cannot have the full and rich meaning which New Testament baptism has. And if that is an argument against the practice of delayed baptism it must also be an argument against infant baptism. Bromiley has stated this criticism thus:

It is in repentance and faith that we are identified with Jesus Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection. To infants who cannot hear the word and make the appropriate response, it thus seems to be meaningless and even misleading to speak of baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ. The confessing believer alone knows what this means and can work it out in his life (Bromiley 1985:115).

If baptism is truly and really union with Christ, incorporation into the covenant of grace and into the church then why is it that baptised children in Reformed churches are not recognised as members of the church, in the full sense, until a later confirmation or confession of faith? Is this not also a new rite, replacing the rite of baptism in the function for which it was originally given? Indeed why is it, as an Orthodox priest once put it, that the Reformed church, having initiated its children into Christ and the church through baptism, promptly excommunicates them by barring them from the sacrament of the eucharist, the sacrament whereby the spiritual life received in baptism is nourished and strengthened? And though some Reformed churches have apparently changed their practices in this regard, it seems unlikely that such changes will become general in the Reformed tradition.

Another weakness, in the eyes of some, is the Reformed position that baptism, as the sacrament of the new covenant, replaces circumcision, the equivalent sacrament of the old covenant. Although König admits that there is some overlap between the two sacraments in the New Testament (1987:75) he puts this down to the measure of confusion that inevitably accompanies a period of transition and points to similar occurrences with respect to temple worship and Sabbath observance. This explanation, however, is not convincing for many. In his anti-circumcision letter to the Galatians why does not Paul simply point out to the Christians there that their baptism has replaced circumcision? And when the circumcision issue was debated at length at the council at Jerusalem, why was not the same thing pointed out? These are questions that have not been adequately answered for some.

Finally, König asserts that the new covenant is the Abrahamic covenant and that the reason it is called a *new* covenant is because the Sinaitic covenant so dominated the situation during and after the time of Jeremiah that the Abrahamic covenant became eclipsed and needed to be brought to the forefront again as the way in which God deals with human beings: by grace, through faith (König 1987:96). For many, such an assertion fails to adequately do justice to the radical newness of the new covenant and would be seen as illustrating the weakness of Reformed theology in general in this area.

5.4 Neglected areas In the three books summarised above the primary focus has been in two main areas:

- (1) The meaning of baptism, especially what God does in baptism.
- (2) The proper recipients of baptism

Less attention was given to the psychological function of baptism as a rite of salvation. Indeed, little attention was given to the role of rites in general and the function they serve in human life. Walsh did give some attention to this area and pointed out that it was a Roman military rite undergone by soldiers entering military service, the *sacramentum*, which provided the very word 'sacrament' taken up in later Christian usage (Walsh 1988:22). But a deeper study of the function of rites in general could cast further light on the role and function of Christian rites, both those in the Bible as well as those that have developed in various Christian traditions in post biblical times. We cannot live without rites, and rites play many different roles in human life. One of the functions of rites is to bring to a concrete realisation at a point in time those inward convictions that have developed over a period of time. Rites play an important role in the process of decision making. Decisions concerning marriage, business, political government, peace and war are all accompanied by rites. The role of baptism as a rite of salvation and its function in providing confirmation and affirmation of the gift of God is a subject to which this thesis will return. Attention will also be given to the development of extra biblical rites of initiation, salvation and assurance where baptism has ceased to function in this capacity.

Virtually no attention was given by any of the three authors to the issue of the proper minister of baptism, except a brief mention by Walsh in a passing way (Walsh 1988:78). By whom should baptism be administered? Another related issue, seemingly trivial at first glance, is the issue of the proper venue of baptism. Where should baptisms normally be administered? Perhaps behind the lack of attention to the above mentioned questions is an assumption shared by all three writers, namely, that ordinarily baptism should be administered by an ordained minister of the church in the presence of the congregation gathered together. It is interesting to note the comment made by G W Bromiley in an article on lay

baptism: 'The NT affords neither precept nor precedent for the administration of baptism except by an ordained minister' (Bromiley 1985:117). But what grounds does he have for such a statement? Certainly very few in the New Testament. A much stronger case could be made for the following statement: that *baptism in the New Testament was administered by any Christian to any person desiring to become a Christian at any place and at any time*. In the following few pages this statement will be developed somewhat for the purpose of highlighting one of the underlying themes of the writer's thesis, namely, that there are significant differences between baptismal practises in the New Testament and all contemporary baptismal practices, so that no contemporary baptismal practice can justly claim to be identical with that of the New Testament.

A brief look at the Acts of the Apostles reveals some interesting patterns concerning the administration of baptism. Wherever and whenever the gospel was proclaimed those who believed were baptised immediately. This aspect of New Testament baptism was emphasized with great clarity by König (1987:16). Furthermore the agent of proclamation was normally also the agent or minister of baptism. This means that where the apostles preached the gospel they also baptised the converts. This was the case on the day of Pentecost and also with the baptism of Cornelius. But we must immediately ask whether the 'ordained ministers' (apostles and elders) necessarily performed the baptisms themselves in every case. The sheer numbers involved on the day of Pentecost makes it likely that the apostles had some assistance at least in this task. In the case of Cornelius a much smaller group of people were involved, the close friends and relatives of Cornelius gathered in his home. Yet even then we read that Peter 'ordered that they be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ' (Acts 10.48). The language here employed suggests that Peter delegated the task of baptism to some of his companions rather than necessarily doing it himself. And his companions were not 'ordained ministers' but simply 'some of the brothers from Joppa' (Acts 10.23). The possibility that the apostles sometimes delegated the administration of baptism becomes even more likely in the light of Paul's statement that he very rarely baptised anyone himself but usually delegated the task to someone else (1 Cor 1.14-17).

Now the apostles, of course, were not the only agents of the proclamation of the gospel. Early on in the Acts of the Apostles we read of a vigorous ministry of preaching and baptising being carried out by some of the 'seven'. It could be argued, of course, that they were ordained ministers as hands were laid on them with prayer. But the function for which they were chosen was entirely practical, the distribution of food to widows. They were chosen, in fact, precisely to relieve the 'ordained ministers' and to enable them to focus on the ministry of the word without distraction (Acts 6.1-4). The reason why Philip baptised the Ethiopian eunuch was not because he was authorised to do so by some special ordination, but simply because he was the instrument in proclaiming the gospel to the eunuch and leading him to Christ. The eunuch wanted to become a Christian so Philip baptised him.

There is further evidence that ordinary believers, disciples, were engaged in both preaching and baptising. The apostle Paul himself was baptised into Christ and the church by a man who is simply described as a disciple (Acts 9.10) and of whom we hear nothing further in the New Testament. The church in Antioch was founded by ordinary believers, described as men from Cyprus and Cyrene, fleeing from the persecution that had arisen in Jerusalem. As they spontaneously shared the gospel 'a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord' (Acts 11.21). There can be no doubt that those who turned to the Lord were baptised by the disciples. It was only after the establishment of the church in Antioch that a 'leader' was sent from Jerusalem to investigate what was happening, and he found nothing lacking in the church. It is probable also that the church in Rome was established in much the same way as the church in Antioch. There is certainly no evidence of any apostolic visit to that city before the church had already been established. It is surely significant that the two churches that were destined to play such a significant role in the history of the church were founded and established by a ministry of what would later be known as lay preaching and lay baptising.

In the light of the above it is astonishing that Bromiley could state: 'The NT affords neither precept nor precedent for the administration of baptism except by an ordained minister.' The facts rather seem to indicate that the

majority of baptisms were carried out by ordinary believers. And this fits in with the immediacy of baptism to which König drew attention. Baptism in the New Testament was the way in which people became Christians. It was the way in which people were cleansed from their sins and received the gift of life eternal. Hence the urgency of baptism. If a person was once convinced of the truth of the gospel and desirous of becoming a Christian in order to be saved 'from this corrupt generation' (Acts 2.40), there could be no delay. To remain under the wrath of God one moment longer than necessary would be both foolish and dangerous. So those who believed were baptised immediately, whether in the middle of the night, as with the Philippian jailer; or in the middle of a journey, as with the Ethiopian eunuch; at home like Cornelius; or by the river bank as with Lydia. The one important thing was to be baptised, wherever and by whoever, so that deliverance from darkness to light, from Satan to God, and from sin to salvation could be procured.

In terms of understanding the function of baptism in the New Testament the closest functional parallel today could well be the various rites that Evangelical Christians have developed in 'leading the lost to Christ'. Evangelical theology (and this includes Pentecostal and Charismatic theology) puts great stress on the importance of the individual making a personal conscious decision for Christ, a decision which can be looked back to as the reception of salvation and the new birth in Christ. All Evangelical Christians are encouraged to witness to others and if their witness is received to lead others to Christ. This may take place anywhere, in a home, on a journey, or on a street corner. And those convicted of their need for salvation would be urged to receive Christ immediately, without delay, for in delay is the danger of failing to receive the grace of God. This contemporary practice illustrates, in the writer's view, the function of baptism in the New Testament and helps us to understand why baptisms were administered immediately, any place, and often by 'lay' members of the church.

Interestingly enough, the practice of lay baptism finds greater recognition in Catholic and Orthodox churches, with a high sacramental theology, than in Protestant, Reformed and Evangelical churches. The official position of

the Roman Catholic church is that 'bishops, priests and deacons are the ordinary ministers of baptism, although in the case of imminent danger of death, anyone with the right intention may administer the sacrament of baptism' (Upton 1990:79). In 1215 the fourth Lateran Council decreed as valid baptism by whomsoever, properly conferred; that is conferred with the intention 'of doing what the church does' and with the necessary matter and form of the sacrament (Twombly 1965:605). It is interesting that in terms of this decree the *whomsoever* can be a non-Catholic or even a non-Christian and the baptism still be valid. The only criteria is that the person baptising should have 'the use of reason "with the intention of doing what the church does"' (McKenzie 1977:997).

Various Catholic theologians have alluded to this dimension of the lay administration of baptism, either directly or by implication, but very rarely develop it in any way. Hans Küng declares quite boldly: 'The entire Church is given the power to baptise; every Christian has the power to baptise (and to teach)' (Küng 1976:380). Aidan Kavanagh states that:

Christians are said to be baptised to priesthood; they are ordained only to exercise that priesthood in the orders of service tradition has called the episcopacy, the presbyterate and the diaconate. Priesthood is thus fundamentally a baptismal phenomenon, and it can never lapse among the baptised even though any or all of the ordained orders of service may and have done so (Kavanagh 1989:301).

While Kavanagh makes no direct reference to lay baptism, the idea of all Christians being baptised to priesthood would seem to imply it. The same could be said of the following comments of the Orthodox priest, Paul Lazor, in describing details of the liturgy of the Orthodox rite of baptism:

It should be noted that several of the liturgical actions performed at Baptism and Chrismation are the same as those done at ordinations. The laying on of hands, the giving of a vestment and the circling procession are all executed at ordinations to the Orthodox Priesthood. ... The use of these liturgical actions in Baptism and Chrismation indicate that these sacraments, too, involve a consecration to

royalty, an ordination to priestly service to God.... The entire Church is a priestly race. Therefore, all Services and Sacraments are performed by the whole Church (Lazor 1983:14).

As has already been mentioned above, this little excursus on the subject of lay baptism has been inserted here for the sole purpose of emphasizing the considerable gap that exists between the normal pattern of baptismal practices in the New Testament and today. The issues of the proper minister of baptism and the venue of baptism are closely related to the question of the function of baptism. Today, there are considerable differences between various church traditions in the understanding of the function of baptism. And it needs to be realised that in all church traditions there has been a development in the understanding of the meaning and function of baptism. In the next chapter an attempt will be made to trace developments in the early church in the understanding of the function of baptism. Further insight in this area will hopefully enable us to consider more meaningfully, in chapter seven, the central theme of this thesis: baptism, reconciliation and unity.

CHAPTER 6

DEVELOPMENTS IN THE EARLY CHURCH: THE HISTORICAL QUESTION

In literature dealing with baptismal practices in the early church there are two approaches discernible, a theological approach and a historical approach. Those emphasizing a theological approach claim that historical evidences can be interpreted in various ways and a sound theological grasp of the context in which the evidences occur is needed as a guide to a correct interpretation. Other writers have put more emphasis on research into primary sources, calling for the suspension of theological presuppositions so that the evidence of the primary sources can be followed, without bias, to their own conclusions.

6.1 The theological approach The phenomenon of household baptisms recorded in the New Testament, where whole households were baptised on receiving the gospel, has been the source of not a little discussion by scholars. Paedobaptist scholars have suggested that these households, in some cases at least, must have contained infants and so infants were obviously baptised in New Testament times. Baptist scholars have responded that careful examination of these passages shows that it is impossible that infants could have been included in these household baptisms. König makes the following perceptive remarks concerning the expression 'He and his whole household were baptised':

If infants [*kinders*] were baptised in the book of Acts, then this expression means that the infants in each household were also baptised. If infants were not baptised, then this same expression does not mean that infants in the household were baptised. In order to know if the expression 'he and his household were baptised' includes infants, it is first necessary to know whether infants were baptised or not (König 1986: 44 translation).

The point that König is making is that to know if a certain statement refers to all or only some of a group, one must know beforehand to whom in that group the statement can refer. Infants cannot run, so the statement 'the whole household ran away' obviously excludes small infants. Infants can be killed, so the statement 'the whole household was killed' would include infants. Accordingly, the meaning of the statement 'the whole household was baptised' is determined by the answer to a prior question 'was it the practice of the apostles to baptise infants?'

Having made this comment, König goes on to express his conviction that the infants in such households were indeed baptised because of the covenantal way of thinking that prevailed in the minds of the believing Jews who constituted the very earliest church.

In a context where people had been accustomed for centuries to family circumcision and for at least one century to family baptisms (proselyte baptism), one can hardly doubt that 'he and his house' would have been understood to include infants where infants were actually present (König 1986:46).

But the theological argument is used equally by Baptist scholars who stress the centrality of faith in the New Testament and maintain that in the teaching of Paul the emphasis is on 'faith as the sole mode of appropriation of the Gospel' (Beasley-Murray 1962:267). Therefore, they reason, the expression 'he and his house were baptised' can only refer to those capable of being baptised, that is, those capable of exercising faith.

6.2 The historical approach Does the study of early church history, in the apostolic period and post apostolic period, furnish any evidence that can provide answers for some of the vexed questions that surround the understanding and administration of baptism? Historical research has provided evidence in abundance, but the interpretation of this evidence has given rise to fiercely conflicting claims. Neither König, Walsh or Beasley-Murray have devoted much space to the historical question. König does not touch it at all. Walsh merely remarks 'There is

nothing in the early records of the Christian tradition to suggest that there was a time when the Church did not baptise children' (Walsh 1988:100). Beasley-Murray gives more space to the issue, but chiefly quotes the conclusions of a number of scholars in support of his thesis that 'infant baptism originated in a capitulation to pressures exerted upon the Church both from without and from within' (Beasley-Murray 1962:352).

In the fifties and sixties of this century the historical question was debated with great erudition by two outstanding German scholars, Joachim Jeremias and Kurt Aland. In 1958 *Die Kindertaufe in den ersten vier Jahrhunderten* was published by Jeremias, the English translation being published in 1960 as *Infant Baptism in the first four centuries*. In 1961 Kurt Aland published a reply to Jeremias's work entitled *Die Säuglingstaufe im Neuen Testament und in der alten Kirche* which in 1963 appeared in English under the title *Did the early church baptise infants?* Jeremias replied to Aland's work with *Nochmals: Die Anfänge der Kindertaufe* published in 1962, and appearing in English in 1963 as *The origins of Infant Baptism*. Jeremias interpreted the evidence in favour of the apostolic practice of infant baptism, while Aland concluded that infant baptism was a post apostolic development. It would not be possible to repeat their various arguments here and some of their arguments are based on New Testament and other evidences that are dealt with in the works by Walsh, Beasley-Murray and König summarised at the beginning of this thesis. These would include discussions of Jewish proselyte baptism, the household baptisms in Acts, and various New Testament texts.

Jeremias and Aland also discuss various references (or possible allusions) to baptism occurring in the writings of early Christian writers such as Polycarp, Justin, Aristides, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Cyprian and Origen. They also discuss the inscriptions found on the tombstones of children, dating from the third and fourth centuries.

It is generally reckoned that one of the first references to infant baptism is found in Tertullian's *De Baptismo*, written sometime between 200

and 206, in which he advocates the postponement of the baptism of children and unmarried people:

It is true that the Lord says, 'Forbid them not to come unto me.' Very well, then, let them 'come' when they are bigger (dum adolescentunt), they may 'come' when they can learn, when they are able to be instructed whither they should 'come'; they may become Christians when they can know Christ (Tert. Bapt. 18.3f).

Jeremias sees here a witness to infant baptism in the fact that Tertullian is arguing 'against an established usage' (Jeremias 1960:83). Aland, on the other hand, discerns in the situation a significant tendency in Carthage towards the baptism of infants:

About AD 200 there was a movement in that area that desired the baptism even of infants, a movement that was manifestly not very old, for Tertullian's polemic is directed against something new; and yet it was so powerful that Tertullian had to enter into open discussion with it (Aland 1963:69).

The Christian inscriptions found on the tombstones of deceased children after the year AD 200 are especially interesting, although, again, Jeremias and Aland draw opposite conclusions as to their significance. These inscriptions contain phrases such as 'Dei servus' (slave of God), 'Χριστου δουλος' (slave of Christ), 'αγνον παιδιον' (holy infant), νηπιος αααχος' (innocent infant) and 'decesset in pace' (died in peace). Jeremias concludes that such attributes and symbols 'allow us to infer that we are dealing with baptised children' (Jeremias 1960:80). Among these epitaphs there is a group of four which explicitly mention the time and date of baptism - in each case shortly before death. The children of this group were of different ages at the time of baptism, from eleven months to twelve years old, and with respect to this group Jeremias concludes 'that these emergency baptisms were administered to children of non-Christians ... whose parents were in all probability pagan (Jeremias 1960:80).

Aland sees the tombstone inscriptions as bearing clear witness that infant baptism was not obligatory in the third century (Aland 1963:79). The fact that where baptismal dates are given, they are all shortly before death points to the phenomenon of emergency baptism which was common in the third and fourth centuries. Aland therefore concludes that in every case where infants and young children were baptised, they were emergency baptisms administered to those in danger of death (Aland 1963:76).

6.3 Areas of agreement

6.3.1 Introduction Despite the fact that Jeremias and Aland came to opposite conclusions concerning the practice of infant baptism in the early church, one of the most valuable and interesting fruits of their discussion was the large body of information on which they were in agreement, and of which there can be said to be general consensus in the scholarly world. It will be useful to summarise these areas of agreement.

6.3.2 The lack of conclusive evidence before AD 200 Both authors are agreed that the sources from the second century do not provide conclusive evidence that infant baptism was practised or that it was not practised. The tombstone inscriptions referred to above all date from the beginning of the third century and in the early Christian writings Tertullian is generally reckoned to be the first to refer to infant baptism. Indeed, in his reply to Aland's book *Did the early church baptise infants?* Jeremias begins by protesting that he never claimed that there is any direct evidence for infant baptism before the third century, and he affirms 'the incontrovertible fact that direct evidence for the baptism of children starts only with Tertullian' (Jeremias 1963:9).

6.3.3 The existence of various baptismal practices after AD 200 Both authors are agreed that the sources provide indisputable evidence that in the third and fourth centuries both infant baptism and a delayed believers' baptism were practised side by side. Indeed we find an extraordinary range of baptismal practices in the third and fourth centuries, ranging from infant baptism to death bed baptism and including a number of varieties in between.

6.3.4 A sacramental theology The early church was characterised by a strongly sacramental theology of baptism. In and through baptism the various benefits of redemption were obtained: the forgiveness of sins, regeneration, the gift of the Holy Spirit and full entrance into the church. The failure to receive baptism was considered in a most serious light.

6.3.5 The existence of the catechumenate Both authors are agreed that from at least the third century onwards those desiring to enter the church were first enrolled as catechumens for a period of about two or three years before being baptised and received as full members of the church.

6.3.6 The practice of emergency baptism At the very least from the third century emergency baptism was administered to catechumens and unbaptised children who were in danger of death. Seeing that baptism was essential for salvation and also efficacious for salvation, it was universally agreed that it should not be withheld from those in danger of dying without it, even if they did not fulfil the normal ecclesiastical requirements for baptism.

It can be seen from the above that there is a considerable area of agreement between Jeremias and Aland concerning baptismal practices in the early church. This agreement constitutes a body of facts that can be said to have been established beyond reasonable doubt and which commands general assent throughout the Christian world. In this way Jeremias and Aland have rendered the church valuable service in establishing that in which there is general agreement and which can serve as a basis for ongoing ecumenical discussion. Having agreed on the parallel existence of various baptismal practices in the third and fourth centuries, both Jeremias and Aland are obliged to provide an explanation as to how such a situation could have arisen. And it is in this interpretation of the known facts that they diverge from one another.

6.4 Jeremias's interpretation Jeremias identifies a crisis developing in the fourth century in a 'tendency to delay one's conversion

to Christianity, if possible to the hour of death in order to die *in albis*' (Jeremias 1960:87). This crisis arose in the decades following the recognition of Christianity as the religion of the state, that is in that period during which countless numbers of pagans were flocking into the church, bringing with them a superstitious conception of baptism which also had an influence on Christian circles. As a result even Christian parents began to postpone the baptism of their children. Jeremias notes: 'Gregory of Nazianzus would not have found it necessary ... to exhort parents to have their children baptised without delay, if that had then been the general practice' (Jeremias 1960:89).

As further witness of this crisis 'in the the middle of the fourth century a new phenomenon occurs on the tombstone inscriptions - the description of dead persons as neophytes (newly baptised)' (Jeremias 1960:89). Jeremias lists eight examples of children from ages one to nine on whose tombstones was inscribed *neofitus* indicating that in all these cases baptism was administered shortly before death. Jeremias also notes that while Basil the Great and his younger brother Gregory of Nyssa sharply criticized those who go on postponing baptism, they did not baptise infants except in cases of emergency.

However despite the crisis in the fourth century and the widespread practice of delayed baptism, Jeremias finds evidence for the survival of infant baptism in the numerous Church Orders dating from that time, the decisions of the Synod of Elvira in southern Spain (c 306) and above all tombstone inscriptions 'concerning infants who obviously were baptised at birth' (Jeremias 1960:92-93). Proof of the last mentioned is the inscription '*in pace*' on the tombstones of children from seven months to four years. Further proof of the continuance of infant baptism is that heretics were said to have practised it just as the orthodox did.

Jeremias discerns an ecclesiastical reaction against the postponement of baptism beginning from about 365. After that date increasing witnesses in favour of infant baptism are found such as Optatus of Milevis, Ambrose of Milan (who justifies infant baptism by appealing to the Old Testament ordinance of infant circumcision), Chrysostom, Cyril of Alexandria and

Didymus the Blind. Traces of the crisis are found in the teaching of Gregory of Nazianzus who as late as 381 advised that children should normally be baptised at about the age of three 'when they can take in something of the mystery, and answer [the baptismal questions]' (Gr.Naz.Or.40). However Gregory's advice seemed to have had little influence on church practice, and by the time of the Pelagian controversy in the early decades of the fifth century infant baptism would appear to be the unquestioned norm of the universal church (Jeremias 1960: 94-97).

6.5 Aland's interpretation In Aland's view the practice of infant baptism has its origin and rise towards the end of the second century, as testified to by sources in North Africa, Palestine and Rome. Yet even in the third century infant baptism is plainly not the rule everywhere, for in those very areas where it had secured a firm place in the church, the custom of baptising children after attaining a maturer age remained in force alongside it, as the inscriptions testify (Aland 1963:100). Hence the fourth century custom of 'postponing' baptism, a usage observed in circles of deep spirituality, did not originate *ex nihilo* but bears witness to the practice of baptising children of a mature age which met with no ecclesiastical objection. Aland points out the complete unaffectedness with which Gregory of Nazianzus, at that time patriarch of Constantinople, recommended the baptism of children at the age of three years; surely he must have been conscious of remaining within the limits of what was possible and usual in the church. So the 'postponement of baptism' in the fourth century is not something new and unheard of but indeed represents the last epoch of the practice of the ancient church. However this epoch came to an end in the fourth century, and by the time of Augustine infant baptism is an established custom that cannot be gainsaid (Aland 1963:101).

But how is the change to infant baptism to be explained? Aland finds the key to answering this question in the doctrinal development in the early church with respect to the innocence of infants.

... so long as it is believed that children are without sin, infant baptism is not needed. For baptism is a bath of cleansing, in which a

man is washed clean from his sins. If a child born of Christian parents is sinless, it does not need this bath of cleansing. As soon as the conviction becomes prevalent, however, that an infant participates in sin, even when born of Christian parents, infant baptism as a requirement or practice is unavoidable (Aland 1963:104)

Aland maintains that the New Testament and the Apostolic Fathers show that the primitive church regarded infants and small children as innocent. The Gospel sayings of Jesus about little children as well as 1 Cor. 7.14 are adduced. In the *Letter of Barnabus* and the *Shepherd of Hermas* he finds the presumption of the innocence of children unambiguously intimated, as indeed it is throughout the Apostolic Fathers (Aland 1963:105). This belief in the sinlessness of infants was held continuously till the time of Tertullian. But from the moment that the taint of original sin was believed to apply to the newborn child, its baptism became a necessity, as witnessed to in the arguments of Origen in favour of infant baptism. Echoes of the earlier view concerning the innocence and purity of children did last on in considerable areas of the church, as is hinted by the opposition of the Pelagians in the fifth century to the idea of original sin implanted in the newborn child from Adam. However infant baptism had become so well established by that time that Augustine could argue: If children have no sin when they are born, why are they baptised? (Aland 1963:107).

6.6 An alternative hypothesis The theses put forward by Jeremias and Aland to provide an explanation for the known and agreed historical facts of the early church have both, in this writer's view, serious deficiencies. A key element of Aland's explanation is his theory that the early church regarded infants and small children as being without sin and therefore in no need of baptism which was essentially 'a bath of cleansing, in which a man is washed clean from his sins' (Aland 1963:104). As part of the evidence cited in favour of his thesis, Aland refers to Paul's description of the children of believers as 'holy' (1 Cor. 7.14) and therefore in no need of cleansing by baptism. But then what of the children of pagans? Presumably they would be born in uncleanness, being the offspring of unholy, pagan parents. But if those pagan parents were

then converted and cleansed of their sins by baptism, would not their children who were born in uncleanness also surely need cleansing? However Aland makes no provision for the baptism of any infants and small children in the primitive church, and this would seem to be an inconsistency in his theory. Furthermore, Jeremias is surely correct in pointing out that the $\alpha\gamma\iota\alpha$ of 1 Cor. 7.14 denotes an eschatological consecration rather than a moral integrity (Jeremias 1963:81). In his writings the apostle Paul continued the rabbinical doctrine of an evil impulse inborn in man (Wallace 1974:734), and although it is true that the doctrine of original sin was only worked out logically in the fourth century, yet even the Apostolic Fathers and the earlier writers were aware that 'We are not simply born into a sinful world, but we are born with a propensity toward sin' (Bloesch 1984:1013).

According to the explanation offered by Jeremias the period following the recognition of Christianity as the religion of the state in the fourth century saw countless numbers of pagans flocking into the church with a superstitious conception of baptism which led them to delay their baptism as long as possible. This in turn influenced the Christian families to delay the baptism of their children (Jeremias 1960:95). There are, however, two problems raised by Jeremias's explanation. The first is that clear evidences that Christian children were not always baptised in infancy begin from the start of the third century, more than a hundred years before the state recognition of Christianity. Moreover, the third century saw some of the fiercest persecutions of the church by the state, so it would be impossible to attribute any baptismal developments in that period to the influence of 'countless numbers of pagans flocking into the church'.

A second problem with Jeremias's explanation is that if the practice of infant baptism had been the rule and norm in the church for more than two centuries, it is difficult to conceive how the scruples of pagan converts in the fourth century could have induced Christian families all of a sudden to abandon a custom of such long established usage. The sheer novelty of delaying the baptism of Christian children until adulthood (which was so widespread in the fourth century as to be almost normal)

when previously they had always been automatically baptised as infants is very difficult to reconcile with the high value the early church attached to customs reckoned as apostolic.

Indeed, the argument that no novelty could possibly be suddenly introduced into the church, especially in a usage of such fundamental importance as baptism, can be used against the explanations provided by both Jeremias and Aland. Against Aland it can be argued that if the primitive practice of the church was to baptise only adults, or, at the best, more mature children and adolescents, then the introduction of infant baptism would have been a sheer novelty which would certainly have been opposed vigorously and with much debate. However, there is no sign of such opposition and debate in the sources. It is because of the unsatisfactory nature of the explanations advanced by Jeremias and Aland that an attempt will now be made to propose an alternative hypothesis to explain the facts as well as an explanation of how it was that the anomaly developed in the fourth century of infant baptism and delayed baptism existing side by side.

It must be emphasized very clearly at this point that what follows is a hypothesis - a suggested explanation for a group of facts or phenomena. It is the writer's conviction that none of the arguments adduced so far, neither the theological arguments nor the historical arguments, are completely conclusive in a final sense. And the same goes for the following hypothesis. But it is advanced as a working hypothesis with a view to promoting the overall goal of this thesis; reconciliation and unity in baptismal doctrine and practice. Some will detect in the following pages something of a Baptist bias, and very likely they will be correct. As was made clear in the introduction no one comes to a subject like this without some kind of heritage, without certain preconceptions and experiences which altogether form some kind of bias. But the possession of a bias does not preclude the possibility of seeking to promote reconciliation and unity in the area of baptism. On the contrary, it demands it.

Baptism in the New Testament, this hypothesis suggests, was the way in which people received the gospel of Christ, the way in which they received Christ himself becoming united thereby to the company of believers in Christ, the church. Acceptance of baptism was in essence an act of faith, a rite of decision and a rite of salvation. As a rite of decision, it was the point in which the decision to follow Christ and to be associated with other believers committed to the same way was realised. As a rite of salvation it was accompanied by an affirmation of the divine gift of salvation freely given to all who believe and are baptised into Christ. In this way baptism could also be said to serve a psychological function, bearing witness to the candidate and others: 'I am a believer; I belong to Christ who has saved me by his wonderful grace'.

This baptism would not have been given to infants unconscious of what was happening as this would defeat one of the important functions of this rite, namely, to provide a conscious experience which can be stored in the memory and referred to by self and others. Baptism given to infants would inevitably and invariably need to be supplemented by additional rites at a later stage fulfilling the function for which baptism was intended in the first place. Neither would this baptism have been unnecessarily delayed but always given immediately to anyone desiring it. Such a baptism was not intended as a sign of approval to those who have undergone a probationary period but rather a means of grace to be given to those who desire it on the basis of faith alone.

At first blush this approach might seem to be indistinguishable from that of Aland's, or, at the best, only a slight variation of it. But there is a fairly important distinction. In many places in his book Aland implies that baptism in the early church was restricted to adults, or, at the most, adolescents (except in cases of emergency). Aland projects back into the New Testament itself the tendency of the early post apostolic church to deliberately separate initial faith from baptism by a period of time in order to test the genuineness and sincerity of the motives of the baptismal candidate as well as to give rudimentary instruction in the basic doctrines of the Christian faith (Aland 1963:42). It therefore follows that he sees the development of the catechumenate as a logical

development, inherent in the proper understanding of New Testament baptism. But this delayed baptism is distinctly different from the immediate baptism being suggested in this alternative hypothesis. We have already referred to König's recognition of the immediacy of baptism in the New Testament. Pierre Marcel has also drawn attention to the 'disconcerting speed' with which converts were baptised in the early church. 'At the first sign of faith and repentance, and following on their decision to be disciples and to live thenceforth a new life in view of the life eternal, they receive baptism' (Marcel 1981:176). The function of baptism as being a person's actual response to the Gospel and the very point of union with Christ by faith has also been pointed out by Gregory Dix (1967:96).

New Testament baptism, this hypothesis suggests, holds together the biblical elements of salvation by grace through faith (Eph.2.8) without confusing these elements with one another or dividing them from each other. Baptism is salvation. Baptism is grace. Baptism is faith. And none of these elements can be emphasized to the exclusion of any other, without distorting the carefully nuanced New Testament understanding of baptism. Baptism holds together in deliberate tension the divine and human factors in salvation: divine grace, human response. In the words of the Lima document produced by the World Council of Churches, 'Baptism is both God's gift and our human response to that gift' (Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry 1983:3). Baptism is salvation, as it 'saves, sanctifies, purifies, mediates and gives the forgiveness of sins' (Barth 1959:29). Lampe sums it up by saying 'Everything is given in baptism because God is given' (Lampe 1967:xxiv). There need be no restraint in statements declaring the saving efficacy of baptism as long as it is remembered that the reception of baptism is an act of faith. Indeed, in the New Testament the words baptism and faith are used interchangeably, meaning the same thing and procuring the same effects. It is these observations that lead Schnackenburg to ask: 'Is there any real contrast in Paul between baptism and faith?' (Haire 1968:154).

But how did this New Testament baptism develop into the different varieties of baptism testified to in the sources from the third and fourth

centuries? It was the perceived inadequacy of Jeremias's and Aland's answer to this question that led to the formulation of an alternative hypothesis in the first place. So what follows forms a vital part of this hypothesis. It must be pointed out that the sequence outlined below cannot be understood always in a strictly chronological sense, as some of the variations would have had a parallel development.

6.7 The development of and variations in baptismal doctrine and practice

6.7.1 Delay The first significant development was to delay the baptism of converts and to impose on them certain tests, both doctrinal and practical. This development might well have been the fruit of a growing spirit of asceticism and legalism in the early post apostolic church (Walker 1970:38). The following description by Lietzmann of the procedure followed when a convert requested baptism is probably true already of the second century:

If he were converted, he reported himself to the 'teachers' of the church as a catechumen. Then there came a serious testing; he had to declare what moved him to make the change and become a Christian, and his Christian friends had to give a sort of guarantee for him. Then his outer relationships in life were tested, and the first requirement laid upon him was that he should avoid every form of non-conjugal intercourse. If he were the slave of a Christian master, he must be recommended by that master as worthy of reception; if he served a pagan, faithful labour became a duty for him for the sake of the good reputation of the Christians (Lietzmann 1967b:151).

Clearly the conviction was developing in the church that those desiring baptism must first prove themselves worthy of its reception.

6.7.2 Elaboration of the rite The spontaneity and immediacy with which baptism was first administered meant of necessity that the rite was kept simple; a simple washing in water as the latter was available. The pragmatic instructions of the Didache: 'If no running water is

available, immerse in ordinary water. This should be cold if possible; otherwise warm. If neither is practicable, then sprinkle water three times on the head' (Did. 7) bear witness to the primitive practice. If an adequate quantity and quality of water are not immediately available, then the best must be done with what there is so that baptism be not unnecessarily delayed. Concerning the performance of baptism there seemed to be no restriction in the New Testament as to who did it. On the contrary, as has already been observed, baptism by lay persons (to use an anachronism for apostolic times) would seem to have been normal.

However, as the practice of delaying baptism gained favour it is understandable that a psychological need arose to 'improve' upon the simplicity of the earlier rite so that the ceremony that climaxed the period of careful testing and instruction should be suitably awesome and exulted. Naturally, as Ignatius instructed the Smyrnaeans, only the bishop could be entrusted with the performance of the rite, or at least those authorized by him (Ign. Smyrn. 8). The following description by Lietzmann gives an idea of the considerable elaboration of the baptismal rite that had occurred as early as the second century:

The candidate for baptism was made ready by a fast which lasted one or two days, and which was shared by certain friends. Then the baptismal water was purified by exorcizing the elemental spirits which dwelt in it, and was prepared for the sacred ceremony.... [in a special rite of exorcism] the priest placed his hand upon him, blew on him, anointed his forehead, ears, and nose: this was followed by a renewed fast for the night. Early in the morning, at cock-crow, the baptism began; ... after the candidate had undressed, he was required first of all solemnly to abjure Satan and all his service and works, to which hitherto he had been subject; thereupon he was once more anointed with the exorcising oil. Then he went down into the water, and gave the new oath of service, the 'sacramentum', to his new Lord by uttering the three-fold baptismal creed, whereupon he was plunged three times beneath the water ... Afterwards, all passed from the place of baptism into the church, where the bishop transferred the gift of the Holy Spirit to the newly baptised by laying on of hands,

anointing, making the sign of the cross, and a kiss (Lietzmann 1967b: 132).

The *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus, composed about 217, and many other baptismal liturgies dating from the third century onwards all show that the baptismal rite had developed into a ceremony worthy of the great event it both signified and mediated. This, of course, could only happen when the delay of baptism made possible the necessary planning and preparation of the occasion.

6.7.3 Ritual efficacy It has been seen that New Testament baptism is a rite of salvation. But in apostolic thinking the power of baptism is not so much in the outward rite, the washing of water, but in that which is expressed in and through the rite, the answer of a good conscience towards God and faith in the resurrected Jesus Christ. Indeed, according to the apostle Peter, the washing is ineffective without the faith element (1 Pet. 3.21). One of the most profoundly significant developments in baptismal teaching, in the view of this hypothesis, was the transference of the efficacious element of baptism from its faith component to the outward rite. In this way attention was focused on the power of the water, or the oil of chrismation, or the hands of the bishop, rather than on the efficacy of faith and repentance in obtaining the grace of God. An example of this can be seen in the following extracts from the *De Baptismo* of Tertullian:

Thus the nature of the waters, having received holiness from the Holy, itself conceived power to make holy. ...all waters, when God is invoked, acquire the sacred significance of conveying sanctity: for at once the Spirit comes down from heaven and stays upon the waters, sanctifying them from within himself, and when thus sanctified they absorb the power of sanctifying - ... Thus when the waters have in some sense acquired healing power by an angel's intervention, the spirit is in those waters corporally washed, while the flesh is in those same waters spiritually cleansed (Tert. Bapt. 4).

Tertullian goes on to explain that the efficacy of the water extends only to the forgiveness of sins; the Holy Spirit is given with the act of chrismation and the laying on of hands of the bishop. Tertullian was certainly not alone in these sentiments, although there was some confusion and difference of opinion as to whether the Holy Spirit was given in the washing of water or the laying on of hands immediately after. That such confusion should arise was inevitable, given the elaboration of the rites and the exultation of their efficacy. The significance of Paul's question to the Galatians 'Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard?' (Gal.3.2) seems to have been lost in the post apostolic church to a large extent. Baptism was the occasion of the Galatians' reception of the Spirit, and the vital element of *that* baptism was faith in the message heard.

When the understanding of baptism as a rite of salvation overshadows or even eclipses its function as a rite of faith then the New Testament balance between the human and the divine, between salvation, grace and faith is upset. And when this is coupled with the conviction of the absolute necessity of baptism, the way is opened for further developments, some of them quite bizarre. Lietzmann, for example, reports of a practice that developed in the case of a convert dying before baptism. 'The corpse was baptised, and another person gave the answers to the liturgical questions instead of the dead. In many places, even the Lord's Supper was administered to the dead man' (Lietzmann 1967a:141). Even those who were 'baptised for the dead' in Paul's time (1 Cor.15.29) were probably guilty of a similar misunderstanding, confusing salvation with the rite of washing alone. Baptism is indeed a rite of salvation - when the washing with water signifies an appeal to God for salvation through Christ.

6.7.4 No forgiveness after baptism With the elaboration of the rite to an impressive and awesome ceremony, and in the light of the careful and painstaking preparation for that momentous event over a prolonged period of time, it is unthinkable that the solemn vows and promises so made could be dishonoured by later unfaithfulness and sin. And if such should occur, the conviction grew that there could be no further forgiveness for such apostasy. And so it was that 'a powerful current of

thought in the second-century church favoured the view that no remission was possible for sins deliberately committed after baptism' (Kelly 1980:198). This view found Scriptural justification from the passage in Hebrews, 'It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened (φωτισθέντας) ... if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance' (Heb. 6.4-8). Hence the pardon that was obtained in baptism, which effected an actual sinlessness, was to be carefully maintained. To lessen the harshness of such a teaching, in practice the custom became established of permitting the forgiveness of one failure after baptism, but only one, and that on condition of public confession (Harnack 1896:109).

6.7.5 Extended delay It is easy to see the inevitable result of the previous development - a prolonged postponement of baptism, even until just before death, so that reasonable assurance may be had of dying in the purity of baptismal forgiveness, unsullied by any post baptismal sin. The reason for this delay is quite different, of course, from the delay noted in 6.7.1. That delay was for the purpose of testing and instructing the candidate, and was imposed by the church. This extended delay was self imposed and was the result of a fear that temptation to sin after baptism might prove too strong and thus cause the irreparable loss of baptismal grace and eternal life. This tendency to delay baptism for as long as possible became especially widespread in the fourth century, and was, for a time, very common (Edwards 1973:79). It was practised by pagans entering the church, fearful of falling back into old pagan habits, as well as by children of believers, wanting first to pass through the storms and temptations of youth before receiving a baptismal absolution that could never be repeated or renewed if once it was lost. In the latter case parental guidance and advice strongly influenced the delay of baptism. Clearly the concept of sin functioning behind this practice was a very formalized, superficial view of sin, a view which regarded sin as certain outward deeds. This is usually the case when religion moves in a legalistic direction, as was the case, to a large extent, in the post apostolic church.

6.7.6 Emergency baptism We must now begin to take note of the simultaneous and parallel development of divergent practices in baptism.

The trend towards the delay and even the extended delay of baptism has already been noted. However the opposite trend towards the baptism of children at an ever younger age was also in progress for quite a different set of reasons. And the beginning of this movement can be traced to the practice of emergency baptism.

Given the practice of delaying baptism and the conviction of the necessity of baptism for salvation, the problem inevitably arose of the catechumen who had not yet completed the required period of instruction and who then fell ill and was in danger of death. To die without baptism meant to die in one's sins without forgiveness and regeneration, and thus to suffer eternal loss. To preclude such a tragedy the one who was ill would hastily be baptised by an 'emergency baptism'. Augustine, for example, in his *Confessions* relates how as a boy he fell seriously ill, and being in danger of death, he was about to be baptised when suddenly he recovered so that his baptism was again postponed (Aug. Conf. 1.11).

The same reasoning applied in the case of children. Although the regular practice (in the view of this hypothesis) was that children were baptised only after receiving the prescribed course of instruction so that they could adequately answer the baptismal questions, what if they fell dangerously ill and were in danger of death? Several factors virtually demanded the administration of emergency baptism to children: the natural parental solicitude for the eternal welfare of their children; the prevailing notion of the necessity of baptism for salvation (Schaff [s a]:118); and the growing belief in the efficacy and power of the rites themselves to convey the grace and blessings of redemption. It was especially the last named that opened the way for the baptism of children too young to answer the baptismal questions. Although the tradition was strong that the candidate should personally answer the questions, yet anxiety for the fate of the unbaptised brought powerful pressure on the church to make exceptions to the ordinary rule. Should a child, or an infant for that matter, be denied the sacrament of grace if serious illness renders it unlikely that that child will ever be able to make a verbal confession of faith? Can the church reasonably withhold the grace of life from such little ones, especially when the holy rites are endowed

with such divine power to impart salvation to all who receive them? It would have been impossible for the church to resist the popular pressure for the emergency baptism of sickly children, given the twin convictions of both the necessity and the efficacy of baptism. Mountain reports the case of Galetes, the son of Emperor Valens, who died in the year 379. 'This child was evidently at the point of death; and his father 'swore' with an oath that it should not forfeit eternal happiness for lack of baptism; and so he compelled an unwilling bishop to administer the ceremony' (Mountain [s a]:157). This incident admirably illustrates both the unease with which the church departs from traditional liturgical customs as well as the impossibility of resisting the logical consequences of the newer understanding of the nature of baptism.

6.7.7 Infant baptism If sickly children and infants in danger of death can be regenerated by the grace of baptism, then why not also healthy children? The step from the extraordinary, emergency baptism of children in danger of death to the regular baptism of infants is both a small and a logical one, especially when the high rate of infant mortality in the ancient world is taken into account. The anxiety experienced by Christian parents, for both the temporal as well as the eternal welfare of their children, is easy to imagine. Life was precarious and death often sudden. Although the provision of emergency baptism was made available by the church, yet unexpected death could intervene even before that gracious provision could be availed of. Basil Moss describes an early woodcut which vividly illustrates the tensions and anxieties we have been referring to:

On the right of the picture is the baptistry, where a bishop is plunging a naked infant into the font ... Parents, sponsors, acolytes stand around in various attitudes of edification. On the left is the nave of the church; here another christening party is seen, suddenly halted with expressions and gestures of horror and dismay, just before the entrance to the baptistry; in their midst a nurse holds the corpse of an infant, who was being brought to baptism, but has that very moment unexpectedly died on the very verge of receiving the Sacrament of regeneration, and whose soul must therefore be presumed to have gone straight to hell, in virtue of original sin. The picture

is surmounted by a scroll, bearing the inscription *Unus assumitur et alter relinquitur; Quia magna est gratia Dei, et verax iustitia Dei* [One is taken and the other left; how great is God's mercy, and true his judgement] (Moss 1965: 35).

Moss's interpretation might seem somewhat over dramatic, yet it accurately captures something of the concern felt by many early Christians for the unbaptised, whether adults or infants. The very reason that baptism should be given to newly born infants on the second or third day rather than the eighth, wrote Cyprian to Fides, was: 'as far as we can, we must strive that, if possible, no soul be lost' (Cypr. Ep. 64.2). As infant baptism became more widespread, 'the less there was heard of the catechuminate. It was finally compressed into a brief rite to be performed at the church door before the baptism of an infant' (Toon 1974: 201).

6.7.8 Two baptismal practices As a result of distortions in the understanding of the nature of baptism, there arose in the third and more especially in the fourth century two divergent baptismal practices existing side by side in the church. On the one hand anxiety that baptismal grace might be lost by post baptismal sin led to its prolonged delay. On the other hand anxiety that sudden premature death would result in the eternal loss of an unbaptised child led to infant baptism. This phenomenon led Philip Schaff to comment:

It was in a measure the same view of the almost magical effect of the baptismal water, and of its absolute necessity to salvation, which led Cyprian to hasten, and Tertullian to postpone the holy ordinance; one looking more at the beneficent effect of the sacrament in regard to past sins, the other at the danger of sins to come (Schaff [s a]: 119).

In his consideration of the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus, the Roman Catholic scholar Robert Grant comes to a similar conclusion concerning the development of two divergent practices in the church:

Evidently, then, there were two developments in baptismal practice. On the one hand, adult baptism had been combined with an extended period of instruction, longer than what we could infer from the *Didache* and Justin. On the other hand, the practice of child baptism had arisen along with adult baptism. Apparently this baptism was as a rule for children rather than for infants, although infants seem not to have been excluded (Grant 1976:35).

It must be stressed again that neither of these divergent practices suddenly appeared in the church as a complete novelty, but both developed gradually in an evolutionary way. Therefore it is impossible to point to a clear date when a new practice was introduced. There is no such date. This explains why no evidence can be found of any violent debate or protest, objecting to the introduction of novelties in the church. There was no such debate. There was no reason for it. What can be found in the sources are cautionary exhortations against this or that tendency which was perceived to be divergent from the apostolic tradition. We find Tertullian, for example, cautioning against both tendencies. On the one hand he urges those unnecessarily postponing their baptism to get baptised. On the other hand he advises the delay of baptism in certain cases, namely young children and unmarried young adults. On balance we would have to class Tertullian among those who contributed towards the extended delay of baptism, and his advice possibly influenced the prevalence of that practice in the fourth century. In the fourth century there are many voices of protest against the prolonged postponement of baptism, and while some church leaders such as Chrysostom advocated the baptism of infants, others such as Gregory of Nazianzus advocated the baptism of children when they could make their own responses. All, however, were agreed that in the case of infants in danger of death 'It is better to be consecrated without knowing it than to depart unsealed and uninitiated' (Grant 1976:37).

6.7.9 The triumph of infant baptism

After the fourth century the practice of delayed baptism largely died away, at least in the Catholic Church, while the practice of infant baptism prevailed and became the norm for the children of believers. The

following reasons can be advanced for this development:

- 1 The earlier rigid discipline which rejected the possibility of repentance for sins committed after baptism gave way to a more lenient and reasonable discipline as the church grew in size and numbers, and especially after it became the favoured religion of the state with the conversion of Constantine (Chadwick 1975:175). As the practice of penance for the forgiveness of sins after baptism grew in acceptance, so the pressure for the delay of baptism withered away.
- 2 The continuing convictions concerning the absolute necessity of baptism and the efficacy of the rites in themselves provided both the logic and the motivation for infant baptism, before which the practice of delaying baptism gradually gave way (Cunningham 1969:204).
- 3 The last named process was completed by the full development of the doctrine of original sin in the course of the Pelagian controversy. The following two conclusions of the Council of Carthage held in 417 make this point clear: 'If any one says that new-born children need not be baptised, or that no original sin is derived from Adam to be washed away in the laver of regeneration ... let him be anathema. ... if any one says that there is in the Kingdom of Heaven, or in any other place, any middle place, where children who depart this life unbaptised live in bliss ... let him be anathema' (Bettenson 1975:59). Clearly in the light of such convictions it would be cruelty itself to withhold salvation from helpless infants when it is in the power of the church to give it through baptism. It is not surprising that not long thereafter the baptism of infants became compulsory by imperial law.

Having reviewed the above hypothetical development of various baptismal practices, the question remains as to why these developments should have taken place? How is it that changes can occur in the understanding and practice of baptism? There are no simple or easy answers to such questions. But one important factor must be the cultural factor, and in the case we are considering, the transition of the church from the Jewish culture of Palestine to the predominantly Greek culture of the Roman world.

6.8 The cultural factor An understanding of the complex psychological and sociological processes involved in the transference of religious ideas from one culture to another is a vital key to the understanding of the development of Christian doctrine in the early church (Hünnerman 1986:85). The Jewish mind in New Testament times had been trained up and conditioned by a two thousand year old heritage of biblical thinking that was pervaded by concepts of monotheism, revelation, grace and law, judgement and salvation. The Greek mind, on the other hand had been deeply influenced by its own heritage of paganism, metaphysical speculation and philosophy. The very languages of Hebrew and Greek had been shaped by their cultural milieu. The difficulties of transferring religious concepts from the one to the other were immense (Bruce 1986:658). In an article outlining some of the fundamental differences of approach in Semitic and Hellenistic thinking, Van der Linde asks: 'Is het mogelijk, dat bij de overgang van Hebreeuws naar Grieks aan breedte is gewonnen, maar aan diepte is verloren?' And the answer must surely be: not only is it possible but it is unavoidable. The fact is that it is impossible to translate concepts from one culture to another without those same concepts undergoing certain subtle changes. And this is precisely what happened with the transmission of Christian doctrine and faith from Jewish to Greek culture. 'In the process of transmission the expression of that faith changed beyond what many an outsider might recognise' (Walls 1985:1). The beginnings of this process can be traced right back to the New Testament where we find signs of conflict and tension between the Gentile mission headed by Paul and the strongly Jewish Jerusalem church (Achtemeier 1986:1-26).

If we apply this principle now to baptism, it can be said that the Gentile Christians received customs and doctrines which they did not, indeed could not, fully understand (Walls 1982:99). And even though they could read and study the basic Christian documents, the Septuagint and the New Testament, yet 'Too often they read the Greek Bible through the eyes of Greek philosophy without realising that they were wearing tinted - or tainted - spectacles' (Wright 1982:77). So it was that in the transmission of the gospel from Jew to Greek something of the original, finely tuned, theological balance could have been lost. The church continued to speak of

baptism as salvation, as the apostles had done; but the focus was now more on the rite itself than on the faith and repentance expressed in the rite. The Pauline concept of grace, manifested in the immediate baptism of believers, was reinterpreted as a new law whereby proof of worthiness and purity of life was required as a condition for the grace of baptism. Baptism no longer witnessed quite so clearly to the good news of salvation by grace through faith.

As already mentioned in the introduction, in developing the above alternative hypothesis to explain the anomalies found in the baptismal practices of the third and fourth centuries the writer has drawn quite heavily on work previously done for a MTh entitled *Baptism in the early church: an examination of the historical investigations of Jeremias and Aland, with special reference to the ecumenical implications of their debate*. Indeed, the whole of the present thesis *Baptism, reconciliation and unity* is the logical development of preliminary conclusions arrived at in that dissertation. Shortly before that dissertation was completed an article by David F Wright appeared in the *Scottish Journal of Theology* entitled *The Origins of Infant Baptism - Child Believers' Baptism?* (Wright 1987:1-23). In this article David Wright, then a senior lecturer in Ecclesiastical History in the University of Edinburgh, examines the baptismal discussion between Aland and Jeremias and comes to conclusions remarkably similar to those proposed in the above alternative hypothesis. He makes the following concluding remarks:

So the baptism of babies in families converted to Christianity may have begun early in the apostolic age, although the baptism of babies born to Christian parents probably did not. The latter may have developed out of the emergency baptism of infants sometime in the second century, or out of the inclusion of infants in household conversion baptisms, or out of the practice of baptising very young children who could answer for themselves. In so far as more of the evidence points to young children belonging to the Christian community alongside their elders and hence presumably on the same basis of faith-baptism, the extension of children's baptism to baby

baptism is becoming an increasingly attractive hypothesis (Wright 1987:22).

When researchers coming from different backgrounds (in this case Baptist and Presbyterian) start coming to similar conclusions then the possibilities of convergence (which will be dealt with in chapter 8) and even reconciliation and unity become more hopeful.

Before closing this chapter a few remarks need to be made concerning the significance of this chapter for the overall purpose and goal of this thesis. If the general pattern of development outlined in the alternative hypothesis above is an accurate interpretation of the historical sources then it must be concluded that *all* contemporary baptismal practices are a development of the apostolic baptism of the New Testament, and that no church today can claim to be administering baptism 'as the apostles did in the New Testament'.

Certainly the vast majority of those churches practising believers' baptism (understood in the sense of rejecting infant baptism) cannot make such a claim, as their baptism is essentially a delayed baptism, whether the delay is a few days, a few months or a few years. Furthermore, their baptism differs in function from New Testament baptism, being a baptism of witness, in which the candidate bears witness to salvation already received through Christ by a decision previously made, rather than a baptism of salvation in which the candidate actually receives salvation through Christ.

Delayed baptism is also practised by Paedobaptist churches with respect to converts coming to Christ from a non-Christian background. The enrolling of such converts into a catechumenate to receive instruction and preparation for baptism is common to all churches, whether they be of a Baptist, Catholic or Reformed type. Infant baptism, too, if the above hypothesis is correct, is a post apostolic development. Lastly it can be said that in all Christian churches the administration of baptism is reserved to special ministers, special times and special places. Whether it be during a Sunday service by a minister (Baptist, Presbyterian), or

in a baptistry by a priest (Roman Catholic), or in a river by a prophet (African Independent), or in a swimming pool at a Charismatic fellowship meeting - all of these have a certain structure and planning about them which is remarkably lacking in the New Testament instances of baptism. As we have seen above, the pattern in the New Testament seemed to be that baptism was administered to whoever desired it, wherever they happened to be, immediately, and by whoever was available to administer it.

Such a conclusion demands a certain humility on the part of all participants in the discussion and debate over baptism. None of us can claim 'We practise New Testament baptism'. All of us must acknowledge our practices differ from those in apostolic times. Does this mean that we are all wrong? Not at all. As already pointed out in chapter 5, the categories 'wrong' and 'right' are not helpful in the area of contemporary baptismal practices. To explore strengths and weaknesses is more helpful. Furthermore, the possibility that certain developments were both legitimate and necessary cannot be excluded. The development of the catechumate, for example, in the early post apostolic period might well have been the correct thing to do in the given circumstances. In Aland's view the practice of infant baptism in the church today is 'both needful and legitimate' (Aland 1963:110) even though it is a post apostolic development.

Rather than conclude that we are all wrong, it would be better to conclude that we are all right, or partially right at least, insofar as every contemporary baptismal practice preserves some vital aspect of New Testament baptism. The Catholic approach to baptism with its strongly sacramental character preserves the New Testament emphasis that baptism is salvation, no mere symbol but the very means whereby the grace of Christ is received. The Baptist approach to baptism bears witness to the New Testament reality that acceptance of baptism is an act of faith, an appeal to God for salvation through Christ in the belief that Jesus is the Saviour. The Reformed approach to baptism underlines the primacy of grace in all God's dealings with human beings. Baptism is grace, the gracious act of a God who loved us before ever we loved him, who chose us before we chose him, and who gathers his people as a covenant community of redeemed

people, a community that embraces all, from old to young, in the eternal covenant of grace.

From this basis, the humble acknowledgment that none of us is 'wrong' and that none of us has 'got it all', we can engage in authentic dialogue towards reconciliation and unity. This dialogue will then not be pursued from some lofty position of absolute truth, seeking ways in which we can tolerate the errors of weaker brothers and sisters, but from a common base of weakness, deeply conscious of our fragmentation, partial knowledge, and need of one another for wholeness.

CHAPTER 7

BAPTISM AND UNITY

7.1 Introduction In the Forward to his book *Theology in Reconciliation* T F Torrance writes the following opening words:

Any theology which is faithful to the Church of Jesus Christ within which it takes place cannot but be a theology of reconciliation, for reconciliation belongs to the essential nature and mission of the Church in the world. By taking its rise from God's mighty acts in reconciling the world to himself in Christ, the Church is constituted 'a community of the reconciled', and in being sent by Christ into the world to proclaim what God has done in him, the Church is constituted a reconciling as well as a reconciled community. The task of theology is made more difficult, however, by the fact that although the Church has been sent into the divided world in the service of reconciliation it has allowed the divisions of the world to penetrate back into itself so that its own unity in mind and body has been damaged, and its mission of reconciliation in the world has been seriously impaired. It is incumbent upon theology, therefore, to find ways of overcoming disunity within the Church as part of its service to reconciliation in the world, ... Christian theology is thus inescapably evangelical and ecumenical (Torrance 1976: 7).

The work of God through Christ in the world is a work of restoration, reconciliation and reuniting into one that which has been broken and divided by sin. 'The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work' (1 John 3.8). The devil's work is sin which has shattered the original unity of God's creation and fragmented humankind into countless hostile camps at war with one another: nation against nation, tribe against tribe, race against race, family against family, brother against brother. Every conceivable difference between people has become a potential flashpoint for hatred, alienation and conflict, whether they be cultural differences, linguistic differences, economic differences,

ideological differences or religious differences. Christ came not only to destroy the works of the devil, but to reverse the tragic consequences of human sin. And he came not only to heal the brokenness of individuals, alienated from God and one another, but he came also to heal humanity itself, to bring together the scattered children of God and make them one (Jn 11.52), 'to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ' (Eph 1.10). There is a universal and even cosmic dimension to the saving work of Christ as well as the personal and individual one. The purpose of God is nothing less than through Christ 'to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross' (Col 1.20).

We see that in the Scriptural passages touching the purpose of God in Christ for the world there is this continual refrain of 'bringing together into one', emphasizing the restoration to unity and wholeness that which was broken and divided by sin. For this reason the issue of unity is one of such profound importance for the Christian church. 'Its oneness is given by God precisely to restore into unity all the diversity of His creation; its Catholicity is precisely this capacity of unity to save, to fulfil, to bring back all humanity' (Congar 1939:98). Now if reconciliation and unity lie at the very heart of God's work in the world, through Christ and through the church, then baptism is pre-eminently the sacrament of reconciliation and unity. Through baptism men and women are being incorporated into the unity of the 'one new man' in Christ (Eph 2.15). 'For we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body - whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free - and we were all given the one Spirit to drink' (1 Cor 12.13). But before we pursue this line of thought any further we need to reflect somewhat further on the biblical emphasis on unity.

7.2 The biblical emphasis on unity

7.2.1 Introduction The ecumenical movement is generally reckoned to have had its beginnings at the International Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910. Since that time many churches have been deeply involved in discussions around the theme of Christian unity and a considerable body

of literature has grown up on the subject. But there is a significant number of churches, largely of a conservative evangelical nature, that have remained outside this movement and are often hostile to it, or, at the least, suspicious of it. There have been a number of reasons for this new Evangelical/Ecumenical divide - theological, sociological and political reasons. The scholarly Peter Beyerhaus of Tübingen, for example, has charged: 'The goal of the boldest ecumenical thinkers and leaders has grown increasingly clear: to construct a world community embracing all races, classes, religions, and political systems, united as far as possible under a common world government whose business will be the establishment of world peace' (Beyerhaus 1974:107). In his book *The Fraudulent Gospel* Bernard Smith, at that time National Secretary of the Christian Affirmation Campaign in the United Kingdom, wrote: 'For some Christians this fraudulent theology is sufficient proof that the WCC is Anti-Christ since it fulfils St Paul's prediction (2 Thess 2.11) that even the believers shall believe a lie' (Smith 1977:113). Smith's book was chiefly concerned with the grant of financial assistance by the WCC, the chief vehicle of the ecumenical movement, to liberation movements employing violence in their struggle to gain power.

The above two quotations illustrate how deeply emotive and contentious the issue of ecumenism has become in some evangelical circles. The very word 'ecumenical' has strongly negative vibes surrounding it in the minds of many, and one of the sad consequences of this is that a whole lot of other words that are somehow associated with ecumenism have also become suspect - words like unity, dialogue, cooperation and reconciliation. It is specially sad that Christians deeply devoted to the Bible should be blinded, to some extent, to a theme so deeply imbedded in the very heart of the Bible, the theme of reconciliation and unity. Because this thesis is written from a perspective that is deeply rooted in the conservative evangelical world, and for the sake of those readers who share this heritage, a brief consideration will be here given to the biblical emphasis on unity.

7.2.2 One God, one body Like Israel of old, the church bears witness to the world: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one'

(Dt 6.4). And a vital aspect of the church's testimony to the unity of God is its own unity. In the words of Hans KÜng:

The unity of the Church is a spiritual entity. It is not chiefly a unity of the members among themselves, it depends finally not on itself but on the unity of God, which is efficacious through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. It is one and the same God who gathers the scattered from all places and all ages and makes them into one people of God. It is one and the same Christ who through his word and his Spirit unites all together in the same bond of fellowship. It is one and the same baptism by which all are made members of the same body of Christ, one and the same Lord's Supper, in which all are united with Christ and with one another. It is one and the same confession of faith in the Lord Jesus, the same hope of blessedness, the same love, which is experienced in oneness of heart, the same service of the world. The Church is one and therefore *should be one* (KÜng 1976: 273).

It was because of this powerful link between Christian unity and the unity of God that the apostle Paul urged the Christians in Ephesus so strongly to be 'endeavouring earnestly (σπουδαζοντες) to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace' (Eph 4.3). Disunity among Christians amounts to a denial of the very message of the church, which is a message of reconciliation. Paul was entirely realistic about the forces at work in the world and in the church to bring about division and disunity, 'the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming' (Eph 4.14). Hence his reference to the extraordinary effort required to maintain the unity already acquired. Paul also recognised that this unity, in the horizontal dimension of human experience, was neither perfect nor complete. Rather, it was something growing, even as the body of Christ was being built up 'until we all reach unity in faith and in the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ' (Eph 4.13). The unity attained and experienced by believers was something to be cherished, maintained and increased. We can see a certain parallel here between unity and holiness. Both are the gift of God to his people and their status in Christ. Both are a goal after which believers

strive. 'The spiritual unity of the church is both real and to be realized' (Kuiper 1967:43).

7.2.3 Unity and evangelism A major plank in the platform of Evangelicals has always been a strong and enthusiastic commitment to missions and evangelism. Indeed, the conviction is sometimes expressed in such circles that all the effort and time spent in ecumenical deliberations is really so much wasted time that could more profitably be employed in reaching out to the lost to win them for Christ. Yet in biblical thinking it is a false dichotomy to posit evangelism over against unity. The two are inseparably connected. Nowhere is this more clearly illustrated than in the prayer of Jesus recorded in John 17. There he prays for the church of the future, those 'who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me' (Jn 17.20-21). It is precisely the unity of the church, a unity in love, a unity in God and in Christ that gives the church credibility in its message to a divided and broken world. How can a divided and quarrelling church speak convincingly of the love of God and reconciliation in Christ?

Like Paul after him, Jesus also foresaw a process of growth and development in unity. Thus he prayed: 'May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me' (Jn 17.23). It is not so much the perfection of Christians as their ability to work together in seeking solutions to the problems threatening to divide them that is the evidence of the power of the Holy Spirit among them and the evidence of the divine origin of their faith. In the tough ideological market place of the world, it is not noble ideas that count so much as solid, concrete evidence of a love and unity that transcends the petty, banal and persistent forces of division and hatred that so fragment and impoverish the world.

7.2.4 The scandal and sin of disunity If Christian unity - real, visible, practical and experiential unity - was so important to the apostolic community in the New Testament, then clearly schism and

disunity was a scandal and a tragedy. Schism would be akin to divorce, a tearing apart what God has joined together, something which cannot occur without sin and damage to all parties, something which grieves the Holy Spirit. Hence we can understand the deep indignation felt by Paul when news reached him of the quarrels and party spirit in the church at Corinth, of which he laments: 'One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ"' (1 Cor 1.12). There are many important and weighty issues which Paul deals with in his first letter to the Corinthians, but it is striking that the very first issue he addresses is that of divisions in the church. He begins with a strong appeal for unity: 'I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought' (1 Cor 1.10). A little later he berates them for their lack of growth towards maturity. 'You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men? For when one says "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere men?' (1 Cor 3.3-4). Paul continues to deal, directly or indirectly, with the issue of Christian unity in the first four chapters of this book. Then, after turning his attention to other matters, such as gross immorality in the church, lawsuits among believers, problems relating to mixed marriages, food offered to idols, propriety in worship and the eucharistic meal, Paul again returns to the subject of unity. Although chapters 12 to 14 ostensibly deal with the issue of spiritual gifts in the church, at a deeper and more profound level they are concerned with maintaining unity and love in the context of a diversity of gifts and ministries. So it can be concluded that the one issue that stands out above all others in this letter is Paul's concern 'that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought' (1 Cor 1.10).

7.2.5 The justification of disunity In the face of the powerful biblical exhortations in favour of unity and love and against schism and division, it is astonishing how Christians (especially Protestants) have lightly justified ecclesiastical divisions. As an example of the easy way schism between Christians is so often justified,

Wainwright has pointed to the remarks once made by Gordon Rupp, one of Methodism's most eminent historians, to the 'painless extraction' of Methodism from within the Church of England: 'Call it separation, call it schism, there has never been a break as thoroughgoing and yet undamaging on either side in the history of the Church' (Wainwright 1983:200). In response, Wainwright points out the ongoing fragmentation Methodism experienced after its initial separation from the Church of England, especially in the first half of the nineteenth century, so that by the time the first 'Ecumenical Methodist Conference' was held in London in 1881, 'there were ten separate denominations from the British side, eighteen from America - all Methodists!' (Wainwright 1983:202).

Küng has analysed four ways in which Christians have sought to justify the unjustifiable and evade facing up to the scandal of disunity:

- a. A first evasion is to retreat from the disunited visible church to an undivided invisible church.
- b. A second evasion is to see the divisions in the Church as a normal divinely intended development and to postpone the reconciliation of the church to the time of eschatological fulfilment.
- c. A third and related evasion is to regard the different Churches which have arisen as a result of schism as the three or four great branches of the one tree.
- d. A fourth evasion is to explain the schism by saying that there is only one empirical Church identical with the Church of Christ, which does not recognize any of the other Churches as Churches (Küng 1976:281-282).

Having discussed each of these evasions and exposed the essential bankruptcy of them all, Küng concludes with the following comments:

If we wish to avoid all these evasions, there is in fact only one alternative: not to look for any theological justifications for the divisions in the Church. We should not justify these divisions, any more than we justify sin, but "suffer" them as a dark enigma, an absurd, ridiculous, tolerable yet intolerable fact of life, that is contrary both to the will of God and the good of mankind. And in so far as it is against God's will and man's good, it is at the deepest

level failure, guilt, sin - whether of individuals or of the community - and rarely of one "party" alone. However great the misunderstandings, however understandable the historical genesis of the separation and the circumstances of the break, it should never, never among Christians, have come to a division in the Church. A division in the Church is a scandal and a disgrace.

7.2.6 The cost of unity The apostle Paul was under no illusions concerning the very real and practical difficulties in the way of Christian unity. He himself experienced a difference of opinion with his fellow labourer Barnabus that led to 'such a sharp disagreement that they parted company' (Acts 15.39). Happily, that particular disagreement and separation did not lead to a permanent schism in the church, and later references to John Mark in the letters of Paul show that healing and reconciliation had taken place between those who had so sharply differed. The fact is that whenever Christians come together there will always be a thousand reasons for dissatisfaction on all sides. This means that Christian unity always calls for immense forbearance and forgiveness. Paul's exhortation to the believers in Colosse was: 'clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity' (Col 3.12-14). It is clear from the words of Paul that love, patience and forgiveness are the cords that bind Christians together in unity. Or, to change the metaphor, unity is a tender plant that can only flourish in an environment of humble patience, forbearance and forgiveness. The importance of such an attitude has been emphasized and exhibited by K  ng:

The Churches themselves can do nothing to free themselves from guilt in the sight of God, they can only seek to be freed: they are dependent on forgiveness. So the first step in healing the breach must be an admission of guilt and a plea for forgiveness addressed both to God, the Lord of the Church, and to our brothers: "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." In asking for forgiveness, we ask for the healing of the division and in

asking for forgiveness we declare that we are ready to do whatever is God's will to remove the division: Metanoia! (Küng 1976:284).

7.2.7 Spiritual renewal and unity Now nothing of what has been said above is really new. Indeed, for many readers of this thesis it will all be 'old hat'. Yet it has to be admitted that there are many Christian circles, often characterised by a high regard for the Bible and a deep devotion to its teaching, in which the matter of Christian unity has been strangely neglected or even regarded with suspicion and fear. But the Holy Spirit, whose task it is to lead the faithful into all truth, has a way of overcoming the barriers of human prejudice, even when they have been constructed over centuries of mistrust and hostility. The Charismatic movement of recent decades, while it has been a source of even further divisions among Christians in many places, has also been instrumental in bringing together in remarkable unity Christians long separated by mutual rejection and misunderstanding. An interesting example of the latter phenomenon is the testimony of Michael Harper, former director of the Fountain Trust and a leading figure in the Charismatic Renewal among British Anglicans. In his book *This is the day*, he speaks of the 'three sisters' who had a profound influence on his life, Evangeline (Evangelicalism), Charisma (the Charismatic movement) and Roma (Catholicism). In this unusual approach he describes how his encounter with Evangeline led to his Christian conversion (Harper 1979:13), but he soon discovered the three sisters were not on speaking terms with one another. Evangeline was suspicious of Charisma and positively hostile to Roma. Friendship with Charisma led to a rift between him and Evangeline. Both Evangeline and Charisma had strongly prejudiced him against Roma, even calling her a 'whore', so that when he eventually met the third sister he was surprised to find 'that she was related to the other sisters, and was chaste' (Harper 1979:14). Harper then describes the debt of gratitude he owed to all three sisters as follows:

To the evangelical sister for teaching me the gospel and introducing me to Jesus Christ. To the pentecostal sister for helping me to experience the spiritual dynamic of the Holy Spirit and to explore many neglected areas of the Holy Spirit's activity in the Church and

the world. To the catholic sister for ushering me into a whole new world especially to understand the corporate dimensions of Christian life and to balance the spiritual with the human aspects of Christian truth, the Cross and the Incarnation, Word and Sacraments.

I must confess to a deep longing to see these sisters reconciled to each other; to see them united in Christ and the Spirit, learning from one another and humbly listening to each other. If these sisters could be brought together on a large scale, there is no knowing the blessings that could follow (Harper 1979:15).

Harper admits that there is yet another sister in the family, Orthodoxa (Eastern Orthodoxy), whom he has never really met. He has seen her 'sometimes in the distance' and feels 'Somehow the rest of the family seems incomplete without her' (Harper 1979:52). These excerpts from Harper's book have been included here because they exhibit something of the pilgrimage towards a conviction of the vital importance of Christian unity by a man with his roots in conservative evangelical Christianity and who has fully retained the love and respect for the Bible so characteristic of that Christian tradition.

7.3 The significance of Christian unity for baptism

Baptism, like the Lord's supper, is a sacrament of unity. It is the sacrament of reconciliation whereby we are incorporated into the one body of Christ and made to drink of one Spirit (1 Cor 12.13). In baptism we are united with Christ and with one another (Rom 6.5, Gal 3.26-28). Indeed, it could be said that in baptism we are united with ourselves, as one of the destructive consequences of sin is the disintegration of the human personality into a battle ground of conflicting passions and desires (James 4.1, 1 Peter 2.11). Drawn out of a sinful humanity characterised by alienation and hostility and consisting of multitudinous factions at war with one another and with God, baptism reintegrates us into the unity and harmony of God's new creation in Christ. In short, baptism is, *par excellence*, the sacrament of unity and reconciliation. What a supreme irony is it, therefore, that baptism, the sacrament of unity and reconciliation, should have become a source of division and estrangement. What a massive theological inconsistency that baptism should be a

stumbling block to Christian unity. What an astonishing perversion of purpose that baptism should serve to estrange people from one another. That which was given by God to unite and bring together becomes an instrument of division and separation. What a sad illustration of T F Torrance's observation that the church 'has allowed the divisions of the world to penetrate back into itself so that its own unity in mind and body has been damaged, and its mission of reconciliation in the world has been seriously impaired' (Torrance 1975:7). And we cannot minimize the extent of alienation and division that has been brought about by baptismal differences. In the words of Bridge and Phypers:

...perhaps no command of Christ has occasioned so much controversy, division, bitterness and mistrust as this one. Indeed, as we shall show later, at times it has caused Christians to destroy each other with a ferocity, cruelty and hatred strangely at variance with him who constantly exhorted his disciples to 'love one another' (Bridge & Phypers 1977:7).

This extraordinary inconsistency in the life of the church should be a source of shame and sorrow to all Christians. Like the Corinthians of old, we have been boasting when we should have been mourning. Various baptismal doctrines and practices have been fiercely maintained with little thought of the damage being done to the body of Christ or the consequences of disunity and division. These consequences are of such a serious nature that it is necessary to be reminded of some of them.

7.4 The consequences of disunity and schism Church splits, which can happen in a moment, are very rarely healed, and not without great difficulty, if ever they are healed. There are reasons for this which are not only spiritual but also psychological and sociological and it is necessary to consider some of the complex phenomena which accompany divisions among Christians, especially those which lead to schism, a break in the corporate life and fellowship of the church.

Because baptism involves actions, rites and ceremonies and not just ideas, it is inevitable, perhaps, that differences in baptismal doctrine and

practice should more easily give rise to divisions. Not that other areas of Christian doctrine are merely ideas with no practical consequences. On the contrary, every area of doctrine has enormous implications for life and practice. But these implications are not so immediately obvious or visible as is the case with baptism, which by its very nature has an immediate and necessary visibility. Christians, for example, can hold to conflicting views on the interpretation of the millennium and yet maintain a reasonably united front in their worship, service and fellowship so that an observer from outside the church might not even be aware of some of the tensions and differences existing within the church. And if there are reasonably good relations between the protagonists of the different views, such a situation can continue for years in a church without the issue ever leading to a split. Indeed, the question can be asked if the church has ever, in its entire history, been without such tensions and differences threatening unity and fellowship. Certainly not, in this writer's view. But in the case of baptism, it is just so much more difficult to hold conflicting views and still remain together.

Once points of conflict and tension lead to actual schism among Christians, the possibility of calm, honest and fruitful discussion virtually disappears altogether. Formal schism brings powerful psychological factors into play. Deep down inside, Christians are aware that schism, with all the hostility and trauma involved, cannot be pleasing to God, so there arises in each group a need to justify their action. Legitimate grievances are exaggerated. It becomes vitally important for each side to be able to demonstrate in a convincing way that the blame for the schism lies largely with the other side. Discussion becomes debate in which neither protagonist can concede any points to the 'enemy'. And once the two groups are separated from one another, they continue to grow even further apart from one another, as M J Congar has shown in his study of the major divisions in Christendom:

There is the dead weight of prolonged separation, the growing accumulation of prejudices, the almost irremediable remoteness between divergent developments in each Christian group. Difference and division have been woven into the fabric of social and national

life: Orthodoxy is identified with the national and cultural forms of the East: the Protestant Reforms are closely bound up with modern forms of the State; ... (Congar 1939:39).

In the major divisions considered by Congar, whole communities, societies and nations develop a culture deeply formed by the prevailing religion among them, so that we speak of a 'Protestant' culture, a 'Catholic' culture or an 'Orthodox' culture. One could easily add to that list a 'Baptist' culture, a 'Pentecostal' culture, a 'Reformed' culture and many other even smaller subdivisions of religious cultures. Religious differences become reinforced by social and cultural realities so that they, rather than purely theological considerations, become the most powerful factors keeping Christians apart. Congar himself is an illustration of this point. Being a Catholic theologian of pre-Vatican II vintage he was deeply suspicious of the ecumenical movement which was then still in an early stage of development. With reference to the *Faith and Order* conferences held at Lausanne and Edinburgh he wrote the following:

The position of the Catholic Church in face of all these Conferences is that of knowing with certainty that she possesses in its fullness the truth which all their participants hold but partially and therefore distortedly. It is precisely because she possesses and is this fullness, that the Catholic Church cannot become involved in such meetings: they are sectional affairs and she is the whole (Congar 1939:133).

If the above quotation represents a rejection of the ecumenical movement because of an intransigent Catholic insistence that she is the one true church in which alone unity exists and can be found, many quotations could be made from staunch Protestant sources rejecting the ecumenical movement precisely because of its perceived Romewards trend. In a strongly polemical book against the ecumenical movement, Donald Gillies, an Irish Presbyterian minister from Belfast, makes the following warning:

Courtesy visits and pathetic appeals for union and peace talks are to Rome signs of the weakening of Protestant faith and resistance. ...

We seem to be preparing for a 'Munich' Agreement - at best a mere delaying action - which will prepare the way for the eventual destruction of Protestant resistance before the guile and might of Rome. Whether or not Protestant churches will continue to be betrayed by their leaders, or will turn to a strong Churchillian approach towards evil before it is too late, remains to be seen. ... The rank and file of Protestantism must be warned. The ecumenical climate is depressing and soporific. It is slowly drying up our evangelical fervour. The soft winds of false doctrine are lulling us to sleep and carrying us slowly but surely in a Romeward direction. The cause of true Protestantism is at stake. The work and sacrifice of Reformers and martyrs are in danger of being brought to naught. ... Better even that the Protestant Church should perish than be reunited with 'Catholic' error, superstition and idolatry (Gillies 1964:25).

It is interesting that Gillies does not hesitate to liken the 'Roman Catholic dictatorship' to that of Adolf Hitler, and Protestantism's struggle against Rome to the British struggle against Nazism. This line of argument would have a very special appeal to Northern Ireland Protestants who oppose any thought of the return of Northern Ireland by the British to the government of Ireland. Thus we see the powerful way in which themes of national and social history are drawn in to bolster and affirm Christian divisions, illustrating the sober fact that schisms, once effected, are not easily healed. The above quotations from Congar and Gillies illustrate that when it comes to divisions among Christians it is much more than merely a matter of differences over certain doctrines. It is a matter of a mentality of hostility and fear that makes it exceedingly difficult to even discuss the doctrinal differences involved. Bearing in mind Gillies's emotive references to the 'sacrifice of Reformers and martyrs' it is interesting to note the perceptive observations of a fellow British Protestant and Evangelical, David Watson:

We tend to cling to our traditions, and in particular to those distinctive traditions that have separated us from the other churches. We therefore magnify out of all proportion the secondary issues which have become the *raison d'être* of our particular group.

No doubt we justify these positions by a strong appeal to Scripture or tradition; but often it is more a crisis of group identity. We fear lest we change the boundaries within which we feel safe. The barriers may separate us from other brethren, but at least we know where we belong; it would be too risky, too vulnerable, trying to live without those barriers. Moreover, some of those barriers were erected by the Reformers at the cost of their own lives. They are rooted deep into history and cemented with the blood of martyrs. Can we pull down those divisions for which they gave the ultimate sacrifice? Can we betray the past and deny our heritage? So the argument goes (Watson 1989:338).

Such are the difficulties of trying to dismantle those barriers of which Watson speaks, and such are the hostilities aroused by the mere suggestion of such an action that the temptation is to leave all such matters well alone rather than stir up a hornet's nest of problems. It seems safer and wiser to simply remain in those enclaves inherited from our spiritual forefathers and pursue our activities safely within their protective boundaries. But this is the tragedy of schism. It separates Christians into isolated groups, severely limiting meaningful contact between them, and thus condemning them all to the spiritual impoverishment that results from estrangement and the lack of fellowship and interaction. MacNutt speaks as follows of the moral dilemmas produced by divisions:

Moral dilemmas such as this make you sympathetic to the desires of the churches to remain apart, to protect their flocks from doctrinal confusion by contamination. Such separation and the forming of protective enclaves is the simplest solution, but I believe that ordinarily it prevents us from discovering the synthesis of Christian truth that we need to draw us together. Where I used to believe that I didn't need other Christian churches, I now find that they often have seen some areas of Christian truth more clearly than I, and that I need these other groups, precisely in their otherness (MacNutt 1984:161).

But however strong the temptation might be to form, or simply to remain in, the 'protective enclaves' of various ecclesiastical blocs, each gathered around its own particular doctrinal distinctive, it is Christian truth that is ultimately the victim of such *laager* mentalities. It is ironic that while 'defence of the truth' is so often the watchword justifying the separation of Christians from one another, the result of such schisms is the impoverishment of that very truth supposedly being defended. As Deane has pointed out, the flight from unity can only hinder the process by which truth is apprehended.

The insight that Christ through the Holy Spirit guides his followers towards the truth *only insofar as they grow in respect for and unity with each other* has been more or less ignored by theologians. But not entirely ignored. Somewhere in the writings of Jürgen Moltmann there is the phrase, 'Only an ecumenically united Christianity can become the body of Christ's truth' (Deane 1987:59).

We can summarise the consequences of disunity and schism as follows. When differences between Christians lead to their formal separation from one another and the formation of opposing bodies, then the original points of difference become hardened into deeply entrenched denominational positions. Meaningful discussion becomes almost impossible as theologians from neither side are able to concede any points in an argument without being considered disloyal to their denomination. And if any should change their mind on certain issues they would be obliged to go through the embarrassing and painful process of resigning from their church and going over to the 'other side' - an experience so traumatic as to effectively deter the most from even considering it. And when, from time to time, individuals do 'defect to the other side', the result is one of deep dismay from those 'deserted' together with a stiffened resolve to tighten up the ranks and to defend the cause even more passionately. Churches become victims to the cruel logic that any doubt concerning certain doctrinal positions brings into question the entire *raison d'être* of the church itself. And this is specially threatening when it is remembered that churches and ecclesiastical institutions develop a life and momentum of their own with a fierce instinct for survival. For those at home within

them, the thought of a beloved denomination ceasing its separate existence is a thought worse than death. It is the end of the world. Hence ways need to be found towards creating an environment in which dialogue and discussion can be promoted without the above mentioned threatening aspects being brought into play.

7.5 The need for an environment conducive to fruitful dialogue As long as the baptismal issue is such a dividing one, demanding either allegiance to or the repudiation of a particular church or denomination, the broad patterns of defence and hostility, as described above, are likely to remain. What is needed is the creation of an environment that would be more conducive to honest dialogue, a non-threatening environment in which Christians could feel free to discuss and think through issues without fear. In such an atmosphere not only could Christians develop their thinking and understanding of the sacrament of baptism, but they could even change their minds on certain issues without their church membership being called into question and without all the embarrassing and humiliating consequences that would normally follow such changes in conviction. When Christians have the opportunity to meet together to discuss differences in the right kind of environment, they are often surprised by the positive results of such dialogue. Norman Goodall cites the case of discussions between Lutheran and Reformed churchmen in which

... there is the interesting admission that 'at some points we have discovered that our respective views of each other have been inherited caricatures initially caused by misunderstandings or polemical zeal'. This admission is of wider application: it goes indeed to the heart of many situations in which for far too long churches and Christian people have remained insulated from one another in disunities which have lost whatever original justification they may have possessed (Goodall 1972:64).

One of the reasons why the above mentioned discussions were so fruitful is the principle that was followed by the participating churches that 'none is asked to be disloyal to its convictions or to compromise them, and all

are invited to share reciprocally in giving and receiving' (Goodall 1972:60). This principle which has been so valuable in facilitating inter-church discussions can surely be equally valuable in promoting discussions between Christians at the grass roots level by creating an environment conducive to honest dialogue.

It must be noted, of course, that immensely valuable and extensive work on the subject of baptism has been done by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches. The BEM document produced at Lima, Peru in 1982

... has become the most widely distributed, translated, and discussed ecumenical text in modern times. Some 450,000 copies translated into 31 languages have been studied in a huge variety of situations around the world. Over a thousand written reactions have so far been published. Never before have more than 180 churches reached out to each other by responding officially to an ecumenical document (Faith and Order Paper No. 149 1990:155).

The positive value of the achievement of the Faith and Order Commission in the production of the BEM document cannot be overestimated. The generally positive response to and the lively discussion stimulated by the BEM document has been truly amazing, and one can understand why the authors of the above mentioned paper describe the BEM event as 'an outpouring of God's blessing' (1990:158). Yet possibly the most urgent task now is for that blessing to filter down from the levels of church leadership to the ordinary members in local congregations. How many ordinary church members have ever heard of the BEM document? Indeed, how many of the regular clergy have heard about it - especially those whose busy lives in the round of church and parish affairs leaves them little time to keep track of current theological developments? Among the ranks of those churches that are not connected in any way to the WCC, churches with which the writer of this thesis is most familiar, it is safe to say that very few indeed have ever even heard of the BEM document. This brings us back to the need of stimulating authentic dialogue and discussion on the subject of baptism, and in order to do this, the need of creating an environment

that is conducive to such dialogue. The need for ecumenical discussion and experience, not just in the higher echelons of church leadership, but also at the local level is widely recognised. Hans Küng and Jürgen Moltmann, for example, have written:

Official ecumenism, whether at a *universal* or *national* level, is of only *secondary* importance. Ecumenical experience at the *local* level is not just the point of departure but the aim of *all ecumenical endeavour*. ... Ecumenical activity at the local level has shown that often the real barriers to collectivity and mutual encounter between Christians are not so much doctrinal differences as an emotional attachment to particular devotional practices and a fear that their individual identity is threatened (Küng & Moltmann 1979:xi).

A non threatening atmosphere might well lead Christians of all traditions to reflect more calmly and critically on the baptismal doctrines and practices of their church, without fear and anxiety. Such reflection could lead to a realisation of the need in every tradition for reform and renewal in this area. Out of such deliberations there could well emerge the possibility of allowing greater diversity in various alternative rites and practices. Küng and Moltmann have expressed their opinion that 'the *greatest possible* diversity in the practical application of theological thinking' should be allowed in the local church to the end that it 'no longer admits the practice of excluding *any* Christian from *any* parish service' (Küng & Moltmann 1979:xi). In the next chapter ways will be explored as to how this might be implemented, practically, in the various church traditions which have baptismal practices widely divergent from one another.

CHAPTER 8

WAYS TOWARDS CONVERGENCE

8.1 Introduction If the general thrust of the previous chapter on baptism and unity is accepted, the following points emerge as a foundation for this present chapter:

- * The reconciliation of humans to God and to one another through Christ lies at the heart of the Christian mission to the world.
- * The visible unity in love of this reconciled fellowship is a vital witness to the power of the gospel to save, heal and reunite that which has been marred and divided by sin.
- * Baptism, the sacrament of union with Christ and union with all other believers in the body of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit, is pre-eminently the sacrament of reconciliation and unity.
- * There is, therefore, a profound contradiction of purpose, if not plain absurdity, that baptism should become a source of division and alienation between Christians.

Given the above points it follows that one of the chief failures of most churches in the area of baptism is not the omission or the promulgation of this or that point of doctrine or practice, but rather the allowing of baptismal differences to result in division. If we are looking for something to brand as a baptismal heresy, surely this is the chief and most serious baptismal heresy - neither infant baptism nor rebaptism nor baptismal regeneration, but the rejection of fellow believers on the grounds of baptismal differences. This is the most serious heresy precisely because it is a sin against the chief and greatest commandment of Christ, the commandment to love one another. As Declan Deane has put it: 'There can surely be no greater deviation from the truth than the formal abandonment of love' (Deane 1987:56). This means that whatever

group holds to the 'correct baptism' (whatever that is and if there is such a group) that same group is wrong, and unfaithful to the gospel of Christ, when it uses its 'correct baptism' as an instrument to exclude fellow Christians on account of their 'incorrect' views. Their very zeal for the truth can become a stumbling block to their obedience to Christ just as their zeal for God and the Law became a stumbling block for so many Jews in the time of Paul (Rom 10.2).

If remaining in the truth is essentially a question of discipleship in the Spirit of Jesus Christ, this is *more a matter of orthopraxy than of orthodoxy*: it is realized more in the Christian life than in teaching, more in the deed than merely in word.... In the passages on Jesus' calling of his disciples he never asks first for a profession of faith. The profoundly disturbing Sermon on the Mount is centred not on orthodox belief but on radical observance of God's will in service to one's neighbour. Why? Because Christian truth is concrete (Küng 1980:29).

Many questions can be raised in connection with some of the above statements; questions concerning truth, convictions of truth and the implications of such convictions. Not all of these questions will necessarily have easy or straightforward answers. What of those who have no baptism at all, and are resistant to any form of baptism, yet desire acceptance in the church on the basis of faith in Christ? What of those with bizarre, strange forms of baptism that could not be classified under any of the Baptist/Reformed/Catholic forms of baptism?

8.2 Truth, convictions and dialogue What then is the way forward if the divisive barriers of baptismal differences are to be overcome? Is it the abandonment of any firmly held convictions concerning baptism? Must truth be sacrificed in the interests of unity and reconciliation? Such a course would prove to be utterly fruitless as nothing is accomplished by a mere indifferentism, least of all the cause of Christian unity and reconciliation. In the words of Hans Küng truth must not be sacrificed, but rediscovered.

The Churches cannot be unified satisfactorily on the basis of indifferentist faith and half-hearted allegiances. Diplomatic settlements and compromises in dogma are not the right way. We must be mistrustful of formulas or forms of unity which conceal our differences rather than overcoming them. If unity is to be genuine, dogmatic differences must be settled theologically. They will not be solved by pretending that they are not there or that they do not matter. Unless they are genuinely overcome, they will remain a constant source of infection, the more dangerous for being hidden. We must reject "unity at any price". A Church which abandons the truth abandons itself (Küng 1976:289).

Küng goes on to say: 'Our faith must be stronger, not weaker, our judgment must be clearer, not obscurer, our ability to draw distinctions must be truly critical, not uncritical: this must be the basis of our efforts for unity' (1976:289). Again it must be said, nothing is to be gained by concealing differences or abandoning convictions. On the contrary, open, frank, honest discussion, debate and dialogue are all essential if the quest for truth is to be vigorously promoted.

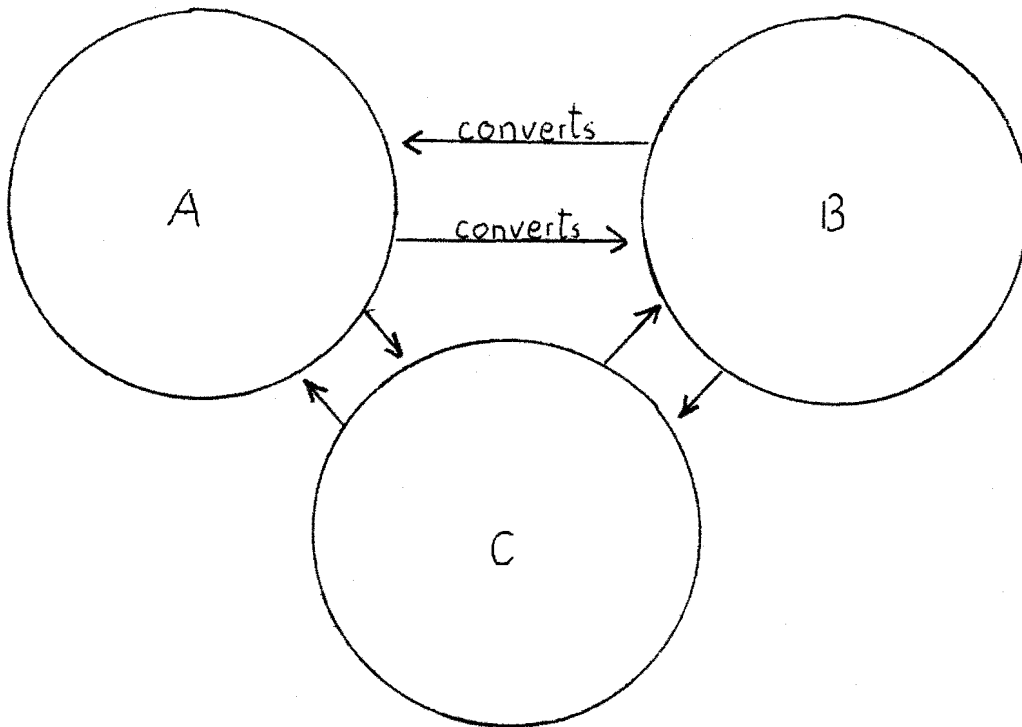
It is important to make this point very firmly at this stage in view of some of the suggestions that will be made later in this chapter and in this thesis. Some will be tempted to think that such suggestions could only be seriously entertained by those with dangerously latitudinarian views, having no clear convictions of truth. But our concern is for the expansion of truth, not the dilution of truth. 'We do not want a watering down of truth to bring us together at the lowest common denominator', as MacNutt has put it, 'we need to come to a level higher, where both truths can be joined without compromise to either position' (MacNutt 1984:161). If this expansion of truth is to be achieved, room must be made for the full discussion and sharing of various views. Any suppression of the process of honest and open dialogue can only inhibit the growth of truth. It can hardly be denied that the present structures of many churches do not serve to promote an honest and open dialogue on the subject of baptism but they rather serve to inhibit such a dialogue. Therefore in the interests of truth it is essential that attention must be given to the

question of church structures and how they can promote or inhibit the full and free discussion that is necessary for the growth of truth and understanding.

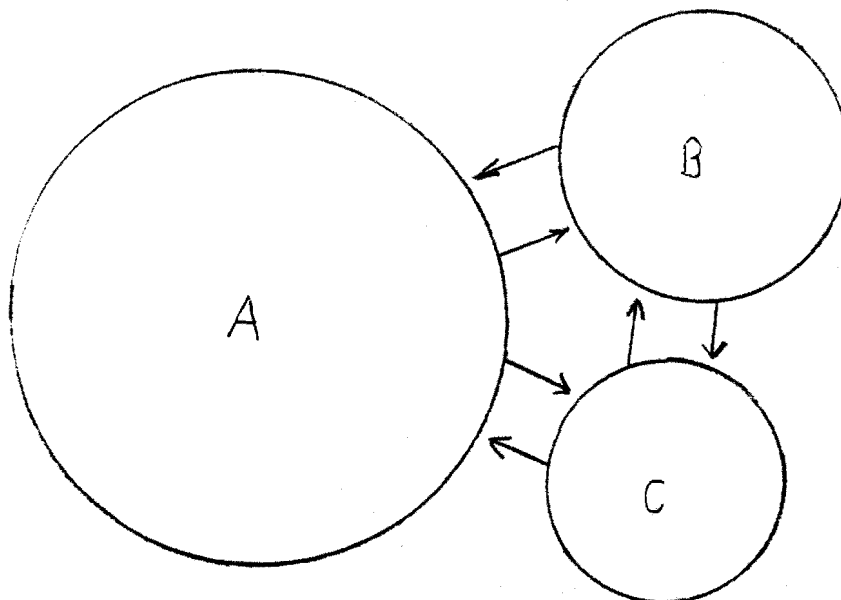
8.3 Two models of church relations

8.3.1 Introduction It must be stressed that the two models of church relations discussed below are in no way models of church union. No attempt is being made here to propose or discuss models of church union. All that is being discussed is how different church bodies relate to one another, and two different kinds of relationship are considered. A discussion of models of church unity would require a very much more exhaustive treatment. König, for example, in one short article mentions seven different possible models of church union - hierarchical, conciliar, organic, spiritual, modality, eschatological and consultative models. (König 1969:93-96). Valuable discussions concerning the unity of the church and possible models of union can be found in Berkouwer (1979:29-76) and Nürnberger (1975:423-429), to mention just two examples of a vast literature that exists on the subject. But the following paragraphs deal quite simply with the way churches (as separate denominations) can relate to one another together with certain suggestions towards more fruitful patterns of interchurch relationships.

8.3.2 The 'laager' model Traditionally much baptismal discussion has been of the 'laager mentality' or 'trench warfare' type, each ecclesiastical body being strongly entrenched in its position and suitably fortified by a well constructed doctrinal barricade. Erudite books or forceful pamphlets are produced demonstrating with a theological *tour de force* the correctness of one point of view and the obvious error of the opposing point of view. The intention of such literary artillery pieces are twofold: firstly, that the faithful may be confirmed in the truth, and, secondly, that those in error might be persuaded of the error of their ways, embrace the truth, and join up with those adhering to the truth. This would imply, of course, separating from the body in error and converting to the body maintaining the true doctrine. This model of church relations could be represented diagrammatically as follows:



The distance between each position is quite clear and the movement from one position to another requires a conversion, not only of doctrinal conviction, but also of ecclesiastical affiliation. If the one body is able to make considerably more converts than the other bodies, after a while the relative positions of the ecclesiastical bodies could be represented thus:

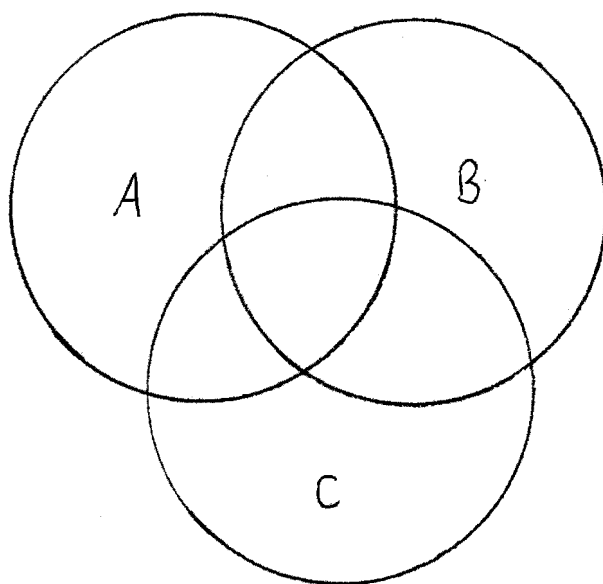


In practice, converts are only made with difficulty. One of the problems is that the literature produced to convince those in error is very rarely read by those in error. Instead, it is largely read by those holding the

same convictions as the author. Because such literature does not usually attempt to portray the opposing view in a sympathetic light, its chief achievement, therefore, is the strengthening of prejudices on either side. This makes the process of conversion even slower and more difficult. The possibility of one body being able to convert all the members of another body to their point of view is a very slim one. Baptists and other Christians who do not practise infant baptism are not going to easily or quickly persuade paedobaptist churches to abandon their practice of baptising infants. And paedobaptist churches are not going to easily or quickly persuade Baptist-type churches to adopt the practice of baptising infants. So the process of conversion, on this issue, is likely to be a very long drawn out one. In terms of Christian witness to the world it will be a costly process, as it will inevitably result in the unedifying spectacle of Christians battling one another, often with acrimony and bitterness.

If the question at issue was one of fundamental importance so that error in it threatened the very heart of the gospel and its saving efficacy then there could be no other alternative than the model described above. No church can consider compromising the gospel or its mission to bring the salvation of God to the ends of the earth. But in the question of baptism this is not the case. The overwhelming majority of credobaptist churches do not question the saving efficacy of the faith of those believers within paedobaptist churches. Neither do the latter question the sincerity of faith of the former. So whatever may be the case in other issues, in this particular issue there must be another model in which churches and Christians can relate to one another in a better and more edifying way.

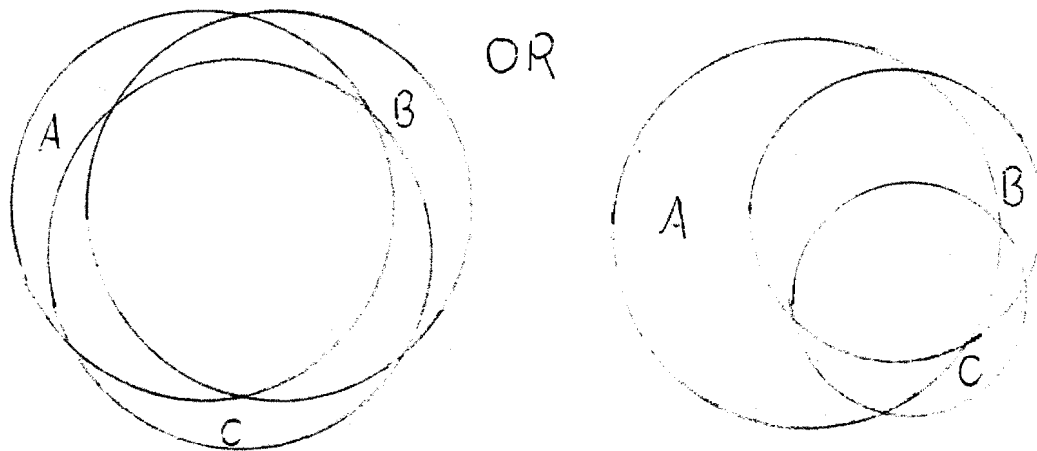
8.3.3 Growing together The underlying concept in this model is that each group or body should expand its basis, not surrendering its own truth convictions but making room for other truth convictions and in this way allowing a process of growing together, or convergence towards one another from within. This model could be represented diagrammatically as follows:



Again it must be stressed that this is not a model of church union. That is not being considered at this place. Each of the churches or denominations, A B and C, retain their separate and autonomous existence. But each one also allows some of the practices of the other two, creating a certain 'overlap' in the practices of the different churches. In this model, the traumatic and acrimonious process of conversion from one camp to another is eliminated, as members of group B can move towards the position of C, or A, or both, without having to abandon their identity as B. In this way a common unity can be forged while the discussion and debate continues. Furthermore, an environment is created in which dialogue and discussion can be carried out in a far more fruitful and constructive way. Instead of the debate being a witness to the world of the failure of Christians to reconcile their differences, it can become a shining example of how legitimate differences can be discussed and debated by Christians within a fellowship of genuine reconciliation. Perhaps the most powerful witness of the church in the world is not some perfect and problem-free society (such a society would be unearthly, unbelievable), but the witness of a community of people, struggling with very human problems, but enabled to pursue their struggle in a community of authentic love, mutual acceptance and reconciliation. 'Even in the Church conflicts are *unavoidable*' as Küng has observed. 'They are signs of life and in any case are to be preferred to the deathly silence of totalitarian systems.'

Conflicts must be endured and a fruitful settlement attempted' (Küng 1980:61). In a world deeply divided into alienated, hostile, prejudiced and conflicting camps, the struggle of the church to patiently endure conflicts and to work with determination towards a fruitful settlement of every division is both a salutary witness to the power of the gospel and a valuable contribution towards establishing the *shalom* of God in the world.

The convergence model considered above is quite open ended as to where the process might lead to. The passage of time might see the emergence of :-



It must be noted that in this model there always remains room for those, whether individuals or congregations, who are strongly convinced of the correctness of their practices and do not approve of any other practices. They, too, must be fully accommodated for, even if they should become a minority, if genuine unity between all believers remains the goal.

The promotion and implementation of such a process of growing together or convergence could be a profound act of faith in the power of the Holy Spirit to lead Christian believers into all truth, and a demonstration of the conviction and confidence that God's truth will prevail in the end. Hans Küng has spoken of the indestructibility of the church by which he means that the church is maintained in truth by divine power. 'Christians

are confident that there is a living God and that in the future this God will also maintain their believing community in life and in truth. Their confidence is based on the promise given with Jesus of Nazareth: he himself is the promise in which God's fidelity to his people can be read' (Küng 1980: 11).

The doctrinal barriers referred to above when considering the 'laager' model and which serve to maintain a rigid distance between the churches are the work of human hands. Indeed, it must be emphasised, that those hands are holy hands, stretched out in genuine concern to protect the ark of God's truth. Yet such actions are manifestations, all too often, of fear rather than faith, a fear that human frailty and error will undermine God's truth unless the latter is suitably protected and hedged around by doctrinal fences. But God is surely able to defend his own cause, and the truth is able to stand on its own and even prevail over error by virtue of the divine power inherent in it.

... if truth is to be continually in the Church, this will not be because the members or at least certain members in certain situations do not make mistakes or because their liability to error is sometimes excluded by higher influence. The reason why truth remains in the Church is because, in the face of all human failings and mistakes, God's truth proves to be stronger and because the message of Jesus continually produces faith, so that Jesus remains in the community of believers and his Spirit constantly guides them afresh into the whole truth (Küng 1980: 15).

This, then, is what is meant by 'growing together' and 'ways of convergence'. The intention of this model of church relations is not an attempt to suppress the truth but rather to liberate it and to promote it, in the firm conviction that there is a divine power lodged in truth that will cause it to prevail in the end.

It could be asked at this point if it is the intention of this thesis to suggest that room should be made in the church for any and all kinds of error in the belief that truth will prevail in the end anyway? Certainly

not. In keeping with sentiments expressed in various other places in this thesis the writer believes that Christians are duty bound to decisively oppose errors that strike at the heart of the gospel. The distinction between primary and secondary issues within a hierarchy of truths is the special subject of discussion in chapter 9. Suffice to say at this point that it is only in those secondary issues in which the gospel itself is not at stake that a policy of openness and flexibility is being advocated. But how can this be applied to the three baptismal approaches we have been considering? What practical steps can be taken by churches in each tradition towards growing together? How could such steps be justified?

8.4 Steps that Baptists and other credobaptist churches could take Generally speaking, Baptists do not recognise the validity of infant baptism. They do not practise it and in most cases do not receive people into church membership unless they have been baptised as believers. But it is equally true that Baptists do not doubt the Christianity of those believers in other communions who trust in Christ as Saviour. For this reason the great majority of Baptists hold to an 'open table' policy when it comes to the eucharistic meal. This means that all Christians are welcome to share in the Lord's table, or Holy Communion, whether they be members of that particular church or not (Cook 1973:73).

There are some Baptists who feel there is an inconsistency involved in a church having an 'open table' and a 'closed membership', that is, gladly receiving other Christians at the Lord's table to share in the sacrament of the Holy Communion on the basis of their faith in Christ while refusing to receive those same Christians into the membership of the church. Thus there are also Baptist churches having an 'open membership' policy whereby believers are received into membership of the church on the basis of faith in Christ alone. Occasionally this leads to the further anomaly of believers being received into membership who have never been baptised in any way at all! Generally speaking, both in South Africa and in other parts of the world, such 'open membership' Baptist churches are a fairly small minority in Baptist Associations - but a significant minority, nevertheless. However, while such 'open membership' churches might be a

minority in Baptist churches, they are a majority in other credobaptist churches. The International Fellowship of Christian Churches (I.F.C.C.) in South Africa, for example, is committed in its statement of faith to the position 'that baptism is the immersion of the believer in water as a confession of identification with Christ in burial and resurrection' (I.F.C.C. 1986:9). Yet the majority of I.F.C.C. churches (with a total membership considerably larger than that of the Baptist Union of South Africa) have an 'open membership' policy. Of course this 'open membership' policy does not prevent these churches from putting considerable pressure on members to be baptised as believers.

On the basis of the above status quo in Baptist circles, a few proposals will here be made concerning steps Baptists could take towards convergence. In addition, an attempt will be made to provide a theological justification, from a Baptist perspective, for such steps.

To come directly to the heart of the matter, let it be suggested that Baptists accept infant baptism as a legitimate, though defective, baptism. This does not mean endorsing or promoting infant baptism. Neither does it mean being compelled to practise it. It simply means accepting fully and unconditionally fellow Christians who are convinced in their own minds of the validity of their baptism without relegating them to some second class status in the body of Christ. That means accepting their baptism as a legitimate baptism, while honestly holding reservations about certain aspects of its mode and administration. 'But what Scriptural grounds', it could be asked, 'do such Christians have to justify their infant baptism as a true baptism?' In answer to such a question we can only point back to chapters 2 and 4 of this thesis, where paedobaptist scholars from Catholic and Reformed traditions expounded their theological justifications of infant baptism. Clearly there are a great many Christians who are convinced that there are good Scriptural grounds for infant baptism. And these include some Christians who are held in the highest esteem by Baptists for their integrity, sanctity and scholarship. This fact alone, surely, must compel Baptists to consider the possibility that there is some substance to the case for infant baptism. Could so many Christians of unquestionable spirituality and sound learning support a position for

which there is not a trace of support in Scripture? Such considerations, of course, fall definitely short of any proof of infant baptism. Exactly the same considerations can be brought in support of those who reject infant baptism, a position which is also maintained by an impressive weight of piety and scholarship. But it does point to the fact that Baptists cannot simply write off infant baptism as a position unworthy of serious consideration, but rather ought to give it some recognition, though retaining the right to criticise aspects of it. The respected British Baptist scholar, Gilmore, has made the same point:

The very inconclusiveness of the arguments for and against both forms of baptism ought to make us stop and think, and also ought to deliver us from a dogmatism that ill-becomes the scholar searching for the truth. No one who has read the literature on baptism during the last fifteen years could honestly feel that either side has really proved its point beyond a peradventure (Gilmore 1966:82).

Gilmore follows on this observation by coming to a conclusion similar to that being suggested in this thesis, namely, that Baptists should give some kind of recognition to infant baptism, whatever reservations they might honestly have in connection with it.

... if infant baptism is 'no baptism', then the Church that practices it is 'no church'. Few Baptists will want to go so far, and fewer still find it possible to support such doctrines in practice. It is better to acknowledge that infant baptism, though partial in its expression of the truth and though involving serious theological distortion, is nevertheless baptism, and cannot therefore be followed by believers' baptism being administered to the same person (Gilmore 1966:81).

The second part of Gilmore's conclusion, that infant baptism 'cannot' be followed by believers' baptism, is not part of what is being suggested here. All that is being suggested here is that infant baptism be given some kind of recognition and that a further baptism be not insisted upon in every case. The point made by Gilmore that infant baptism involves a

serious theological distortion is very similar to the position that Karl Barth came to.

... it is certain that no rejection of the order and practice of baptism through the fault of the Church, or through fault or lack on the part of the candidate, can make the baptism of a person, once it has been performed, ineffective and therefore invalid, or can lead to or justify a call to re-baptism according to a better order or practice. ... Baptism without the willingness and readiness of the baptised is true, effectual and effective baptism, but it is not correct; it is not done in obedience, it is not administered according to the proper order, and therefore it is necessarily clouded baptism. It must and ought not to be repeated. It is, however, a wound in the body of the Church and a weakness for the baptised, ... (Barth 1959: 35 & 40).

Many years later, in the last major work he was to write, Barth had refined his understanding of baptism somewhat but still maintained that despite the doubtful and irregular nature of infant baptism, 'Nevertheless, one cannot say that it is invalid' (Barth 1969: 189).

What would be the practical implications for Baptists accepting infant baptism as a legitimate, though defective, form of baptism? What are the answers to some of the objections that could be raised? Firstly, it must be stressed that both pastors and church members would remain perfectly free in their preaching and practice to maintain with all vigour their credobaptist convictions. They would remain free, too, to engage in honest dialogue and debate with fellow Christians of other convictions, to seek to persuade them, if possible. But they would do all this in an attitude of love, respecting the views of fellow church members, even when they disagreed with them, and respecting their right to hold them. Paedobaptist members of the church would also not be restricted in any way in their service in the church. They would not be barred from any office in the church, such as deacon or elder. To such a proposal the concern is often expressed: 'That would allow people of infant baptist convictions to occupy important teaching posts and undermine the Baptist character of the

church.' To such a concern it could be answered: 'If Baptist truths are so weak that they cannot be maintained in an environment of honest dialogue but must be defended by excluding Paedobaptists from certain positions in the church, then are those truths worthy of faith? Are they from God?'

What is being proposed is quite simply a greater freedom within Baptist churches to hold divergent views on baptism without being penalised in any way on account of those views. This freedom would have to include the possibility of parents having their infant children baptised if they so choose. This would certainly be a departure from historic and contemporary Baptist practice. 'But why do we call ourselves Baptists, if we should permit the baptism of infants in our churches?' could well be a genuinely puzzled protest to such an idea. Such an enquirer could be reminded that the term 'Baptist' was not coined by Baptists, but by their enemies. The first 'Baptists' were simply Christians who desired the freedom to act according to their conscience in the matter of baptism. On being refused this freedom they were cast out of the church and branded as heretics and 'Baptists' (Warns 1962:119). It is actually strange that Baptists should be unwilling to allow the same freedom of conscience in their churches that their spiritual forefathers originally desired in the churches from which they came. There is the fear, of course, that such a 'lax' policy in the administration of baptism might lead, in time, to a church ceasing to be a Baptist church. But again it must be pointed out that if Baptists are convinced of the truth of their convictions, what do they have to fear? Surely in an environment where those of Baptist convictions have the fullest freedom to promote their views, the majority will be convinced of the truth of those views. If they are not, then do such views deserve special protection? It is generally the mark of a weak position that people seek to prop it up by artificial means and protect it from any honest exposure to open debate and discussion. That is surely not how Baptists wish to defend their convictions.

Yet another question could be: 'Who would administer baptism to infants in a Baptist church?' Certainly it would be quite wrong to oblige the pastor of the church to administer baptism to infants if such an action was impossible for him on the grounds of conscience. But are there not others

in the church who could administer baptism? As was pointed out in chapter 5 of this thesis (5.4), baptism in the early church was administered by a wide variety of believers and not only by the 'ordained' leaders. Why should not the believing parents themselves administer baptism to their children? Indeed, should baptisms necessarily be performed in the church, or in the presence of the congregation? These are important questions in the eyes of the writer and will be returned to later.

To summarize this section on steps that Baptists could take towards convergence: they would be to simply allow church members greater freedom to hold to divergent views on baptism and to act according to their conscience, without being excluded from fellowship and church membership or discriminated against in any way in the church. This proposal is anyway entirely in line with the principle of freedom of conscience which is strongly cherished as a central tenant of Baptist faith (Cook 1973:204). It is also in line with what some of the earliest Anabaptist pioneers wanted from their Reformed fellow believers - simply the freedom to act according to their conscience (Walker 1980:326). It is a Baptist scholar, who, contemplating the possibility of permitting both infant baptism and believers' baptism in one congregation, wrote: 'Is there not room in the providence of God for both forms of baptism to co-exist, and might not this inconclusiveness be one means by which God is seeking to lead His Church into something richer than our forefathers ever dreamed of?' (Gilmore 1966:83).

8.5 Steps that Reformed and other Protestant paedobaptist churches could take It would be quite wrong to suggest that Reformed churches do not practise believers' baptism. The baptism of adults on the confession of their faith is administered quite regularly to those who have never been baptised before. In addition to this, baptism is also administered to the infants of believers, whether they be new believers coming into the church by baptism themselves, or whether they be believers who grew up in the Christian community. If such a church was engaged in vigorous outreach to non-Christian peoples, resulting in many being brought to faith and baptism, the baptism of adults on the confession of their faith and the baptism of the infants of

believers would both be common occurrences in the church. But when the church grows chiefly by its own biological growth, then clearly the vast majority of baptisms witnessed in the church will be infant baptisms.

What is unacceptable to Reformed and other paedobaptist churches is the rebaptism of those who have already been baptised, and also that believing parents do not offer their infants for baptism. Those members who accept rebaptism are liable to be disciplined by the church and perhaps even to be put out of the church, unless, of course, they should admit and repent of the error of their rebaptism (Marais [s a]:13). Parents in the church are expected to have their infants baptised and those who fail to comply could also face disciplinary measures, although of a much milder nature.

There are two steps that Reformed churches could take to enhance the process towards convergence. The first would be to permit parents to defer the baptism of their children if, for reasons of conscience, they are not convinced of the correctness of infant baptism. Such children would be baptised at a later stage when able to make a profession of personal faith at their baptism. The pastor and any others in the church would remain free, of course, to seek to persuade such parents to have their infants baptised. Their freedom to teach and share their convictions concerning the validity of infant baptism would not in any way be impaired. But it would mean that they would have to recognise and respect the right of parents to choose in this matter according to their conscience.

The objection could be raised: 'Would not the delay of baptism be an act of cruelty to the infants involved, depriving them of the sacramental grace of baptism?' Two answers can be made to this objection, one practical and the other theological. On the practical level it could be argued that nothing would be gained by the church rigidly insisting upon the baptism of infants without exception. Such an attitude would probably result in the dissident parents leaving the church which would hardly improve the situation for the infants involved. A more flexible approach by the church, on the other hand, would more likely result in the parents remaining in the church which in turn would provide greater opportunity for others to convince them of what is best for their children. On the

theological level it can be argued that the Reformed tradition has generally hesitated to insist on the obligatory nature of baptism in any absolute way. While Reformed theology embraces quite a wide range of views on this issue, the following remarks of Hendrikus Berkhof are probably representative of mainstream Reformed theology:

Though we may not say that children "ought to be baptised," we may say that they too may be given the rite of incorporation if they grow up in a community (family, village, institution) in which they are involved in God's salvation. In every instance it depends, however, on a pastoral decision, not on a general dogmatic principle. In principle the incorporative rite is possible at any age, either before a profession of faith or already earlier as a stage on the way within the congregation toward conscious faith (Berkhof 1986:359).

Berkouwer also refers to repeated statements that can be found in Reformed theology 'that the sacraments are not necessary for the obtaining of salvation. This is not said about the sacraments *in general*, but with respect to *salvation*. The intention of the Reformers is clear: they wished to deny the Roman Catholic doctrine that the sacraments are necessary because they infuse supernatural grace' (Berkouwer 1981:106).

Finally it can be argued that sheer honesty concerning the ambiguities and complexities of the questions surrounding the issue of infant baptism demands a flexible approach rather than a rigidly dogmatic one. We have already noted the admission of a noted Baptist scholar of the 'inconclusiveness of the arguments for and against both forms of baptism' (Gilmore 1966:82). We can also note similar remarks by an Anglican scholar made during a conference on the subject of baptism:

In these last months I have tried to read widely and deeply on baptism, and I must admit I am somewhat mystified at the way some people at the Conference have been so certain on the subject. For instance, you cannot read Jeremias on infant baptism, followed by Kurt Aland on Jeremias, followed by Jeremias's reply to Aland, and believe that anyone can say all that much certain about infant

baptism in the Early Church. ... I have been mystified by the way so often those who clearly want the biblical evidence to be in favour of no infant baptism find that it is so; and vice versa. Honesty must not only be required in one department of our thought about baptism, but in all. And I should have thought that there was one thing that was really certain to those who are concerned for honesty in our thought about baptism: a vast area of uncertainty (James 1965:138).

Such frank admissions of uncertainty are rarely found in baptismal discussion, but perhaps more would be more willing to make them if some of the barriers of fear and prejudice surrounding the subject were to be dismantled.

The second step that Reformed churches could take to enhance the process towards convergence would be to allow room for those who wish to be baptised as believers who have already been baptised as infants. This is, admittedly, a difficult proposal and one which touches upon a very sensitive area. Rebaptism is often seen in paedobaptist circles as the rejection of a previous infant baptism and therefore, by extension, a rejection of the church and community which administered that baptism. But it needs to be asked: 'Does rebaptism necessarily and always imply the rejection of something? Should it not rather be seen as the desire to affirm something?' There are many reasons why people desire rebaptism. In some cases there might have been a profound conversion experience after a long period of having lapsed from any active Christian practice, and there is then a deep desire to testify of this conversion in some significant way. In other cases there might be serious reservations about the validity of the original infant baptism because of the failure of the parents to even attempt to provide a Christian upbringing. And so the list could be extended. But the point that needs to be made is that it is in the interests of the church to create space for those who are convinced of the need to be rebaptised. Often their desire is to remain in the church, and if handled with sensitivity and understanding they have the potential to remain or become active and useful members of the church, even learning to respect others who have not felt led in the same way in the matter of rebaptism. Furthermore, their rebaptism could be viewed by the church as a

celebration or renewal of their baptismal vows. Some churches in the Reformed tradition (eg the Presbyterian Church in New Zealand) have already made use of this concept of 'the celebration of baptismal vows' by allowing members to be immersed in water in the name of the triune God as a celebration of the baptismal vows taken on their behalf as children (the formula used is slightly different from that used in regular baptisms).

A further objection could be made that if such laxity in baptismal matters were to prevail a situation of total confusion could result characterised by widespread rebaptisms and numbers of infants remaining unbaptised. But the answer to this objection would be essentially the same as that given in 8.4 to Baptists who feared the consequences of too much freedom in their churches, namely, that if the case for infant baptism is so weak that it cannot be maintained in an environment of free and open discussion (in which anyway it would be preached from the pulpit), then does it really deserve to be maintained by the questionable means of simply outlawing all contrary opinions and practices and excluding them from the church?

As was the case with the proposals concerning steps Baptists could take towards convergence, so here in the case of Reformed and other paedobaptist churches the proposals discussed above can be summarized quite simply as allowing for greater freedom of conscience in baptismal matters, believing that the truth of God will surely ultimately prevail in an atmosphere of open and honest study and discussion. In an eloquent passage on the precious gift of liberty which is 'both a gift and a task for the Church' K  ng concludes as follows:

No one in the Church has any right openly or secretly to manipulate, suppress or still less to abolish the basic freedom of the children of God and, instead of the rule of God, to set up the domination of men over men. This freedom should be manifested particularly in the Church in free speech (frankness) and the free choice of action or refraining from action (liberality and magnanimity in the widest sense of the terms); and it should be evident also in the Church's institutions and constitutions. The Church itself should be a *realm*

of freedom and at the same time the advocate of freedom in the world (Küng 1978:482).

The kind of freedom being advocated by Hans Küng is always a little unnerving, if not downright threatening, to Christians concerned for the purity of the faith and the unity of their particular church. Yet at a deeper level the granting of such freedom to fellow believers is a profound act of faith in the power of the Holy Spirit to guide his people and the wisdom of God in the management of his church. And if situations of confusion arise in the church with apparently conflicting baptismal practices contending with one another, the end result could well be an enrichment of the church rather than its destruction.

We have to recognise differences that exist amongst us about baptism, and the nature of the confession of faith. These, however, are issues that will be resolved as we draw closer together. In particular we believe that in a united Church the co-existence of patterns of initiation, including both believers' baptism and infant baptism, will itself lead to a fresh appreciation of the insights they reflect, without being destructive of the unity we wish to attain or compromising the question of achieving a common practice subsequently (Hurley 1968:45).

8.6 Steps that could be taken by churches holding to a Catholic and sacramental understanding of baptism By 'Catholic and sacramental' is meant here those churches holding to a 'high' baptismal theology in which baptism is held to be the direct and ordinary means whereby individuals are regenerated to eternal life and become children of God - *ex opere operato*. These churches would include the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Churches as well as many churches in the Lutheran and Anglican traditions. The proposals concerning steps which these churches could take towards convergence are essentially the same as those suggested in the previous section (8.5) for Reformed and other Protestant paedobaptist churches. However, although the proposals might be the same, the problems and

difficulties involved with such proposals would be different on account of the nature of Catholic baptismal theology.

A decision to allow Catholic parents to delay the baptism of their children, if they so choose, until such time as they are able to make a personal profession of faith would be especially problematical in view of the Catholic doctrine of baptismal regeneration and the belief that infants left unbaptised would be deprived of baptismal grace. The omission of baptism would even jeopardize the eternal salvation of the infants concerned, so how could the church be expected to sanction, however grudgingly, such an act? These are serious considerations, and need to be taken seriously by anyone genuinely interested in promoting reconciliation and a convergence towards unity. The writer is persuaded, however, that there are compelling theological arguments, drawn specifically from Catholic theology, that can help to answer these difficulties.

Before considering any theological answer, there is a compelling practical reason why it would be in the church's interest to permit a more flexible approach in baptismal matters. If certain parents should come to have doubts about the validity of infant baptism, a rigid and inflexible response from the church would only tend to drive them into the arms of another church perhaps more sympathetic to their doubts, and that would not improve the situation for any infants involved, from a Catholic perspective. But if, on the other hand, room is made in the church for alternative baptismal practices for those not convinced about infant baptism, then there always remains the opportunity of persuading them, in time, of the merits of infant baptism. This pragmatic approach is more or less a repetition of what has already been said in connection with Reformed churches.

The teaching that an unbaptised infant is in danger of eternal loss is strongly dependent on the Augustinian doctrine of original sin. While the theology of Augustine has played a powerful role in western Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant, some of the implications of the doctrine of original sin have been the subject of considerable debate, also in Catholic circles. The Augustinian view has never found widespread

acceptance in the Orthodox Church, which understands itself to be the 'One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church' of the creed and is, at least, an important component of the 'catholic world' in the wider sense.

Most orthodox theologians reject the idea of 'original guilt', put forward by Augustine and still accepted (albeit in a mitigated form) by the Roman Catholic Church. Men (Orthodox usually teach) automatically inherit Adam's corruption and mortality, but not his guilt: they are only guilty in so far as by their own free choice they imitate Adam. ... And Orthodox have never held (as Augustine and many others in the west have done) that unbaptised babies, because tainted with original guilt, are consigned by the just God to the everlasting flames of Hell. The Orthodox picture of fallen humanity is far less sombre than the Augustine or Calvinist view (Ware 1980:229).

As a result Orthodox Christians, while strongly maintaining the validity and desirability of infant baptism, do not normally experience the anxiety that is often found in western Catholic circles concerning the fate of unbaptised infants. So in this body of Catholic Christendom, at least, the possibility of some parents delaying the baptism of their children might not be regarded as totally unacceptable. But in Roman Catholic theology, too, there has been a long tradition of scholars who have looked 'for a way of affirming the salvation of unbaptised infants that will not contradict the tradition of the universal necessity of Baptism, and the correlative universality of original sin' (Walsh 1988:106). Walsh himself admits:

In truth, it is hard to believe that a God who so loved the world as to give his only-begotten Son for the salvation of all, and who is believed to take more delight in the saving of one lost soul than in the ninety-nine who are already safe, would set a baptismal requirement so rigid that it would exclude from salvation an infant who, through no fault of its own, does not fulfil it literally (Walsh 1988:106).

Walsh then proceeds to survey a number of attempts by Catholic scholars to provide a theological and biblical foundation for the affirmation of the salvation by Christ of infants (especially of believers), whether baptised or not. All this demonstrates, surely, that the possibility of permitting some parents to delay the baptism of their infants, for reasons of conscience, is not completely outside the bounds of contemporary and ancient Catholic thinking. Indeed some of the early Catholic Fathers, such as Tertullian and Gregory of Nazianzus, *advocated* the delay of the baptism of children until they were able to grasp something of the meaning of the rite. While it may be conceded that their views on infant baptism did not represent the mainstream of Catholic thinking at that time, it must be equally conceded that such views were not excluded from the Catholic church of the time. And if the Catholic church of the fourth century was flexible enough to make room for a variety of baptismal views and practices, why can not the Catholic church of the twentieth century do the same? It would seem that at least some contemporary Roman Catholic scholars are thinking along these lines, as evidenced by the following remark in a Faith and Order Paper:

In view of the notable agreement on the meaning of baptism, it is not surprising that there are replies which explicitly state that it is possible for infant and believers' baptism to co-exist in one church. This raises the question of whether this practice could be expanded in order to promote wider consensus (Towards an Ecumenical Consensus 1977: 7).

The above-mentioned document, of course, is not an official Roman Catholic document. Catholic scholars, however, work in such close cooperation with scholars from other traditions on the Faith and Order Commission that the above remarks surely carry the endorsement of significant Catholic theologians - and those who have been officially delegated by their Church to their work on this Commission.

There is an even more powerful theological reason why Catholics should be in favour of greater flexibility in baptismal practice, a principle which should lie close to the heart of every true Catholic. It is the principle

of catholicity. The Catholic church stretches out its arms to embrace all the faithful in Christ throughout the world and eschews, in principle, any tendency to sectarianism or exclusiveness that would divide the body of Christ. In his study on the church in the New Testament, the Catholic scholar Rudolf Schnackenburg speaks of the 'catholicity of spirit' of the apostle Paul as follows:

But the great missionary and theologian also based this openness of the Church to all who wished to be saved and this bringing together of natural contraries in the one community of belief and love on ideas which he derived from the concept of the Church's nature. He himself wished "to become all things to all men" and he made little account of external manner of life, whether according to Jewish Law or without it, adapting himself to the mentality of as many as possible (1 Cor 9:19-22). He took the idea seriously that in Christ a new man comes to be, with whom neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any importance (Gal 6:15) ... The universality of the Church was not therefore promoted merely on missionary or opportunistic grounds but was profoundly rooted in its essential idea (Schnackenburg 1981:138).

Would it be too bold to suggest that the contemporary application of this truly catholic spirit of Paul would lead to the statement: 'Neither paedobaptism nor credobaptism is of ultimate importance, but a new creature in Christ and a fellowship of reconciliation and love centred on Christ'? Of course such a statement would not and could not have been made in the first century. But is it not the dynamic equivalent in the twentieth century of similar statements in the first? In his study of denominationalism and Christian unity, Wolfhart Pannenberg - not a Roman Catholic, but a man of catholic spirit - draws the following conclusions:

The unity of the church is not primarily a unity of doctrine. It rests on a common confession of Jesus Christ. Differences and even contradictions in the way that Christians understand the faith do not necessarily negate the fact that we share a common confession of faith. Such contradictions could be regarded as contrasting

expressions of what is basically the intention to hold the same faith, expressions that correct and supplement each other. To be sure, they could also be regarded as expressions of contradictions that invalidate our confession of Christ, that is, expressions that the other person is confessing something other than faith in Jesus Christ. Which of these is the case must finally be decided by a spiritual verdict on the situation in which such contradictions arise. In terms of a doctrinal confession, contradictions that we previously tolerated in our understanding of the faith can come to be seen as contradictions in our confession of Christ himself. On the other hand, disagreements that were once regarded as crucial to our confession of faith in Christ may, in the light of a later time, lose their force and validity (Pannenberg 1983:81).

Pannenberg is not advocating some bland inclusivity that dispenses with any criteria whatever concerning what is Christian, but rightly distinguishes between those differences that can and ought to be tolerated within a catholic unity and those which cannot. And the different baptismal traditions considered in this thesis surely do not constitute such a contradiction of the confession of Christ that it is impossible for them to be included in a Christian unity.

No specific mention has yet been made of the issue of rebaptism. As in the case of churches in the Reformed tradition, Catholic churches view the question of rebaptism with grave concern and strong disapproval. Arguments that could be brought forward for the allowance of the possibility of rebaptism would be essentially the same as those cited in the previous section (8.5), so they will not be repeated here. Only a few comments can be added concerning the concept of 'the celebration of baptismal vows'. As has already been stated, some churches in the Reformed tradition have made room for those having a strong desire to be baptised as believers by permitting them to receive a rite of washing as a celebration of the vows made by the sponsors on their behalf when they were baptised as infants. This is a recent development in Protestant churches, but the Roman Catholic Church has had for centuries a liturgy for the celebration of baptismal vows involving the sprinkling of the whole congregation with

water by the priest while the congregation repeat their baptismal vows. Seeing that such a 'celebration of baptismal vows', complete with sprinkling of water, already exists in the Roman Catholic Church, the way is surely open for individuals to be washed (by immersion or some other way) in water in the name of the Triune God on confession of their faith as a celebration, or renewal, of their baptismal vows.

8.7 Concluding remarks In all the above suggestions and proposals there is a common theme: greater freedom for individual Christians to be able to act according to their conscience in baptismal matters together with the cultivation of a spirit of tolerance between Christians and respect for each other's views. This would apply, naturally, to all parties involved. Those dissenting from the official position of their church would need to respect the views of the majority who adhere to that position, if they in turn wish to be allowed freedom to act in accordance with their own convictions. Again it needs to be emphasized that the freedom that is being advocated here never implies any official endorsement of views contrary to the official and traditional views, but only and simply a recognition that those holding to irregular views might well be, and often are, sincere Christians, zealous for the glory of God, and therefore ought not to be excluded from the church but rather received and respected, however defective their personal views on baptism might be.

It must be pointed out what real advantages there would be for every church and for the Christian cause in general in the adoption of a greater flexibility in baptismal policy. At the present time it often occurs that Christians from different traditions get married and then find great difficulty finding a spiritual home on account of the inflexibility of their respective churches. Let us take, for example, the case of Christians from a Baptist and a Reformed tradition. The Baptist partner would feel uneasy about joining the Reformed church in which they would be obliged to have their children baptised in infancy. The Reformed partner would be unwilling to join the Baptist church if rebaptism was a condition for membership. As a result the family is alienated, to some extent, from both churches with the very real possibility of lapsing altogether from

any regular pattern of worship and Christian fellowship. They would be lost, in the end, to both churches. It is to be feared that this is no mere hypothetical possibility but an actual reality in many cases. Bridge and Phypers (1977:9) also describe as 'common' cases where Christians from different denominational backgrounds get married and then experience difficulties in finding a spiritual home on account of the inflexibility of their respective churches.

If we refer back to the two models of church relations (8.3) it can be seen that the 'laager' model has clearly demarcated spaces between the various church bodies. It is precisely in these 'spaces' that many are lost to the church. The convergence model (8.4), on the other hand, has no such spaces between the churches, allowing for a gradation of views between the official positions of the different bodies. In this way those who do not comfortably fit into the traditional and official patterns of any of the existing churches can nevertheless find themselves a spiritual home on account of the flexibility permitted. All churches would benefit in the end as the total number of Christians 'falling through the cracks' of ecclesiastical divisions would be fewer. Mention could also be made of the possible enrichment of each tradition precisely through the exposure to views and practices other than the regular ones.

Yet another benefit that could well result from a policy of greater flexibility would be the reduction of the number of new Christian denominations being formed, as those with new insights and non-traditional views might find a sympathetic ear and a spirit of tolerance in their churches rather than an unyielding rigidity resulting in rejection and schism. As a case in point we could take the Disciples of Christ, a major Protestant denomination in the United States of America. Thomas Campbell, one of the founders of the Disciples and a man 'possessed of a truly catholic spirit' (Orr 1965:55), found himself censured by his fellow Presbyterians on account of his welcoming at the Lord's Table various believers who did not adhere to the Presbyterian organization to which he belonged. Others joined with him and this group became associated with the Baptists having adopted baptism by immersion. But their stress on a baptism 'unto remission of sins' and their continued practice of a wide

open communion led to their separation from the Baptists too. Hence the formation of the Disciples of Christ from which in time other schismatic groups developed (Orr 1965:56). And all this from Christian leaders who were deeply concerned for Christian unity! If the Presbyterians had only been more understanding and flexible, how much could they have benefited by retaining this man of clearly outstanding gifts. If the Baptists had been more far-sighted they could have been the beneficiaries. As it was neither group benefited and the division of Christian ranks was further aggravated. Many further examples could be enumerated. What if the English bishops of the eighteenth century had been more flexible and sympathetic towards Wesley and the early Methodists, all loyal Anglicans? What if the sixteenth century Reformers had been more tolerant and understanding of the Anabaptists, who also desired to reform the church according to the Word of God? Indeed, what if Pope Leo X had been able to discern the voice of the Spirit in the voice of Martin Luther, who desired nothing other than to be a faithful Catholic? What if tenth century Latin and Greek Christians had been able to listen to one another in a spirit of understanding and charity rather than hurl anathemas at one another over issues such as *filioque*, clerical tonsures and the bread used in the Eucharist? What if all Christians, like the apostle Paul, were able to rejoice in the preaching of Christ, however defective that preaching and false the motives behind it (Philip 1.18)? How much the church has lost in the past by an unbending and inflexible rigidity in matters which should never have been allowed to divide Christians from one another and thereby bring into being public schisms which have seriously undermined its message of reconciliation and its witness to the work of God which is 'to bring all things in heaven and earth together under one head, even Christ' (Eph 1.10).

The whole thrust of the development of the church throughout history has been in the direction of greater variety as the church has expanded to fill the nations and cultures of the world. Coupled with this has been a continual movement towards greater freedom, not a freedom to indulge the flesh (although it has often degenerated into that) but a freedom in Christ. Where the structures and prevailing attitudes of the churches have been unable to cope with this movement towards greater variety and

freedom, divisions have resulted. It must be realised, however, that this trend will not be reversed. The future will see even greater variety and greater freedoms. The church must recognise this and be prepared for it, so as not to react negatively to every new thing but to be willing to examine all things carefully so as to discern whether what is new is completely incompatible with the gospel or whether it can at least be tolerated in the church.

It might be thought that in the realm of baptism all the possible variations in doctrine and practice already exist in some or other Christian church today. But this would be a mistake. It has already been pointed out earlier in this thesis (5.4) that the contemporary practice (hallowed by centuries of usage) of administering baptism at fixed places (usually a church) and at fixed times (usually on certain Sundays) by an ordained minister of the church has no real foundation in New Testament practice. On the contrary, the evidence available to us, chiefly in the Acts of the Apostles, led to the suggestion of the following thesis: *that baptism in the New Testament was administered by any Christian to any person desiring to become a Christian at any place and at any time.* What if this practice were to be revived today? What if regular Christian believers, taking their stand on the priesthood of all believers, were to claim their right to be the ordinary ministers of baptism? Would the churches regard this as a threat? Would the regular clergy fear that such a movement might take out of their hands altogether the exclusive rights to administer the sacrament of baptism? Would such a movement lead to the formation of yet another Christian sect, characterised by novel and strange baptismal practices and duly shunned by regular Christian churches? Or could the churches reserve judgement and allow room for such a new development, however many reservations they might have about its correctness or desirability? Could they even see in such new developments the possibility of a new and powerful tool in the hands of the 'laity' equipping them more effectively in the task of evangelism? In the world today there are many people, Muslims for example, for whom public baptism is a deterrent to conversion to the Christian faith. The possibility and practice of private baptism might well open a new door in helping the church to break through in some of the difficult challenges it faces in

its evangelistic task. The practice of administering baptism immediately to those desirous of receiving salvation through Christ, without waiting for any special person, time or place would surely restore to the sacrament of baptism the full and rich meaning it has in the New Testament. It might help to restore also a more widespread perception of baptism as the way in which we are united to Christ and receive through him all the benefits of redemption.

Such thoughts might seem to be speculative and rash and in contradiction to the whole aim and tenor of this thesis, namely, baptism, reconciliation and unity. But the point being made is that the church has in the past tended to reject any deviation from the standard and accepted doctrines and practices in baptism, leading to division. In making a decision to be more flexible and tolerant of varying baptismal convictions, it must not only take into account those variations in baptismal practice presently existing but also other variations in administration that might still appear.

A final comment on the content of this chapter. The primary focus has been on those steps various churches in different traditions could take in order to grow towards one another. Clearly anyone concerned with Christian unity cannot avoid the subject of how churches and denominations might actually join together, and such a discussion would necessarily involve a consideration of various possible models of ecclesiastical unity. But that has not been the subject of this chapter. In a sense what has been the focus of this chapter could be seen as preparation for the more serious business of actual church unions. Before churches can even begin to want to discuss unity plans there must be a desire for such a union, and before there can be a desire for such a union there must be some kind of respect for one another. The development of some kind of respect (in the midst of disagreement) has been the thrust of this chapter. The 'models' spoken of here have not been models of church union, but simply models of how churches can relate to one another while still separate and autonomous. If churches from within themselves can begin to grow towards one another, then when the time comes to discuss the possibility of union (of whatever kind that may be) the chasms between them will not be so great or

forbidding. Indeed, it even might be difficult to find any differences sufficiently serious so as to justify remaining apart!

CHAPTER 9

A HIERARCHY OF TRUTHS?

9.1 Introduction In various parts of this thesis there are a number of references to concepts such as freedom of conscience, religious liberty and flexibility of action. For Christians who take their faith seriously, too much talk about freedom of conscience and absolute religious liberty can lead to unsettling suspicions that somehow the very substance of the faith is under attack and the foundations are perhaps being eroded. This is especially true of conservative Christians, from whatever tradition they come, be it conservative evangelical or traditional catholic or orthodox. For this reason it might be useful at this point to consider briefly the issue of 'a hierarchy of truths'. What are those beliefs and practices in the Christian faith which are non-negotiable, concerning which there can be no room for variation of thought as they constitute the very essence of the faith? What are those beliefs and practices in which it is perfectly legitimate for Christians to differ among themselves? What kind of gradation can be made between those doctrines and rites of more or less importance within the Christian faith? Such questions are not easy to answer but they point to the existence of a hierarchy of truths and it is probably true that most Christians would freely acknowledge that in the whole range of Christian teaching there are some aspects that lie closer to the heart of the Christian faith while others are more on its periphery. The Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, for example, produced by Vatican II reminds Catholics that 'in Catholic doctrine there exists an order or "hierarchy" of truths, since they vary in relation to the foundation of the Christian faith' (U. R. II. 11) (Flannery 1992: 417).

The following chapter does not contain an exhaustive discussion of a hierarchy of truths. Such a discussion would require a separate thesis on its own. On the contrary it will only touch very lightly on certain broad aspects of the subject with a view to establishing the idea or concept of a hierarchy of truths. Furthermore, there are considerable allusions in

other chapters (chapters 5, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12 & 13) to the concept of a hierarchy of truths, and there is no desire to unnecessarily overlap with material contained in those chapters.

9.2 The concept of a hierarchy of truths Various Christian bodies, from time to time, have issued doctrinal statements which imply the existence of a hierarchy of truths. Needless to say those things deemed most important, as well as the implied hierarchy of truths, are not always the same.

Conservative Protestants towards the beginning of the the twentieth century produced their 'Fundamentals of the Faith' as an expression of what they considered to be vital to an authentic Christian faith. These 'fundamentals' included doctrines such as the inerrancy of Scripture, the virgin birth of Christ, his deity, his atoning death on the cross, his resurrection from the dead and his personal return.

In 1888 Anglicans adopted a four point statement outlining those aspects of faith and order that could serve as an essential basis for a wider Christian unity. Known as the Lambeth Quadrilateral its points were 1. the supremacy and sufficiency of the Scriptures; 2. the Apostle's Creed and the Nicene Creed as the sufficient statement of the Christian faith; 3. the two dominical sacraments; 4. the historical episcopate (Beckwith 1988:22).

Eastern Orthodox Christians would point to the first seven eucumenical Councils as expressing the catholic faith of the undivided early church and therefore essential to any statement of Christian truth today.

In 1968, in order to put an end to the confusion that was raging in the Roman Catholic Church after Vatican II, the Pope issued his profession of faith which became known as the Creed of Pope Paul VI (Flannery 1982:387-395). This was a papal attempt to sum up those things central and vital to the faith of Catholics. It affirmed faith in the triune God, the incarnation of the divine Word, his birth of the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit, his atoning death on the cross, his resurrection from

the dead, his ascension into heaven and his coming again in glory to judge the living and the dead. It also included belief in papal infallibility, transubstantiation and purgatory (Hebblethwaite 1978:95).

While there is a certain degree of agreement between these various attempts to distil the essence of the Christian faith, there are also notable differences. The creed of Pope Paul VI has much in common with the 'fundamentals' of conservative Protestants - until it comes to the issues of papal infallibility, purgatory and transubstantiation!

In the theological world there has been considerable discussion on the 'goal' (*scopus*) of Scripture which is related to the idea of a hierarchy of truths. Is the Bible a source book of truths on a number of subjects, or is there a goal, a central point, to which all of Scripture tends? What is the intention of Scripture? Berkouwer quotes John 20.31 'But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name' and then comments: 'That which is written is like an arrow shot to hit man's heart' (Berkouwer 1975:125). He likens the Scriptures to a bow, the intention of which is to direct its message toward a central point, namely the instruction of the faithful (1 Cor. 10.11), so that they might hold faith and good conscience (1 Tim. 1.18-19) and be equipped for every good work (2 Tim. 3.16).

In his article 'Die skopus van die Heilige Skrif' Fürstenberg (1970) deals with the same matter. He states that the central tendency of Scripture is the relating of the 'deeds, the mighty works of God' (1970:194 translation) executed for the salvation of his people. The proclamation of the saving acts of God is the basic goal or purpose of the biblical writers with the intention that God's people might put their trust in him (Fürstenberg 1970:197,198). When it comes to the New Testament, the supreme saving act of God in and through Christ becomes the focal point of the apostolic preaching and writings.

Dit gaan in die Nuwe Testament egter nie net om die vervulling van enkele, min of meer geïsoleerde Ou Testamentiese perspektiewe nie, maar inderdaad om die vervulling van die ganse Skrif in Christus.

Gods daad in en met Jesus is die sentrale heilsgebeurtenis. Rondom hierdie sentrum is die totale Skrif gestruktureer ... Dit is hierdie unieke Christologiese sentraliteit van die ganse Skrif, wat die essensiële skopus van die Skrif uitmaak (Fürstenberg 1970:1990).

For this reason Paul could sum up his message as 'Jesus Christ and him crucified' (1 Cor.2.2). Fürstenberg concludes (1970:201) that the intention of the New Testament is to promote faith in Jesus as the Christ and Son of God, together with assurance of eternal life in him. In this his observations are very similar to those of Berkouwer.

J. A. Heyns (1976:87) takes a slightly different approach to the same issue, preferring to distinguish between the centre and the periphery in the Bible, while Berkouwer and Fürstenberg seem to imply that (in whatever way) everything is directed to the centre. Heyns, too, speaks of the purpose, the intention of Scripture on which its message is focused, namely the knowledge of God in Christ (1976:90-91). He is also concerned that a Christocentric approach should not eclipse the full biblical revelation of the triune God. So he suggests that 'the centre of Scripture is God's kingdom, and the centre of the centre is Jesus Christ' (Heyns 1976:92 translation). But different aspects of Scripture are related more or less closely to this central theme. Some are peripheral - details of Mosaic legislation, instructions about women's head covering - these are peripheral in that they do not bear on the centre, the knowledge of God's kingdom in Christ Jesus (Heyns 1976:94-96).

Unitatis Redintegratio Mention was made at the beginning of this chapter of a reference to a hierarchy of truths in the Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio* (U.R.), produced by Vatican II. That document begins with the statement: 'The restoration of unity among all Christians is one of the principal concerns of the Second Vatican Council' (Flannery 1992:408). It later on speaks of the existence in Catholic doctrine of 'an order or "hierarchy" of truths' (U.R. II.11). It is interesting to see how it develops this idea. With respect to the Eastern Churches the document notes 'the fact that the basic dogmas of the Christian faith concerning the Trinity and the Word of God made flesh from

the Virgin Mary were defined in Ecumenical Councils held in the East. To preserve this faith, these Churches have suffered, and still suffer much' (U.R. III.14). Having referred to these matters of primary importance in the faith, the document then draws attention to the differences in ecclesiastical discipline between the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church and states that 'far from being an obstacle to the Church's unity, such diversity of customs and observances only adds to her beauty and contributes greatly to carrying out her mission' (U.R. III.16). What the document says about legitimate variety it is even willing 'to apply to differences in theological expressions of doctrine', observing that 'in such cases, these various theological formulations are often to be considered complementary rather than conflicting' (U.R. III.17). In concluding its comments on the Eastern Orthodox Church, the document states: 'in order to restore communion and unity or preserve them, one must "impose no burden beyond what is indispensable" (Acts 15.28)' (U.R. III.18). It is interesting to note that *Unitatis Redintegratio* also seems to draw a distinction between primary matters of faith, namely faith in the triune God according to the Scriptures, and those matters of customs and observances in which variety is not only legitimate, but even valuable, adding to the beauty of the Church and contributing to the carrying out of her mission.

In its consideration of the Protestant churches arising out of the sixteenth century Reformation, the document again identifies those primary aspects of Protestant faith with which it can identify, namely the confession of 'Jesus Christ as God and Lord and as the only Mediator between God and man for the glory of the one God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit' (U.R. III.20). Furthermore the Council expressed its joy 'that our separated brethren look to Christ as the source and centre of ecclesiastical communion. Their longing for union with Christ impels them ever more to seek unity, and also to bear witness to their faith among the peoples of the earth' (U.R. III.20). Even the Protestant emphasis on Scripture is regarded positively, as 'the sacred Word is a precious instrument in the mighty hand of God for attaining to that unity which the Saviour holds out to all men' (U.R. III.21).

The question can be asked whether the Roman Catholic Church itself (or any other church for that matter) understands the full implications of its own stated principle: that 'in order to restore communion and unity or preserve them, one must "impose no burden beyond what is indispensable"' (U.R. III.18). That which is indispensable is the faith itself, faith working through love, faith in the one true God who has made all things, who has redeemed all things through his Son Jesus Christ and who renews all things by his Spirit. Beyond this indispensable faith and love there are no matters of customs, rites and observances that are sufficient grounds to divide Christians from one another, for such a division would be a repudiation of that love which lies very high in the hierarchy of Christian truths.

What follows in the remaining part of this chapter is not so much an attempt to work out a fully developed hierarchy of truths or even an attempt to enter in any depth into the theological discussion around the subject. Rather it is more a personal exercise in dealing with the biblical material in the Old and New Testaments to establish the concept of a hierarchy of truths and in particular to point out the distinction between what I call primary and secondary aspects of the faith. The purpose of this exercise is to help the reader understand what is meant in *this* thesis when mention is made of concepts such as freedom of conscience, religious liberty and flexibility, and what are the limits and parameters of such concepts.

9.3 Primary and secondary aspects of the faith By primary aspects of the faith is meant those things which constitute the very essence of the faith and without which there would be no distinctive Christian faith at all. By secondary aspects is meant those things which play a valuable and important role in promoting, confirming and consolidating the faith but which nevertheless do not form part of the very essence of the faith so that their absence would not mean the absence of faith. This also means that error in such secondary aspects, or differences of understanding and practice are not destructive of the faith itself. The distinction here being proposed is much the same as the distinction between the *esse* and *bene esse* of the church used by some of

the older theologians, that which consists of the being of the church itself and that which consists of its wellbeing.

What, then, is here proposed as essential to Christian faith? Faith in God as he has made himself known to his people in his redemptive acts in history - a faith that is worked out in obedience to the covenantal commandments that have always attended God's salvation of his people (cf. Heyn's summary of the central message of the Bible: 'God regeer en Sy heerskappy moet gehoorsam word' 1976:93). This is faith: faith in God, not any god but *this* God, the God of Abraham, the God of Israel who saved his people out of Egypt and gave them their own land and established his covenant with them that they should observe it, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who died on the cross and rose again to save his people from their sins and who has established a new covenant for all believers. To know this God, to believe and trust in him and to keep his commandments - this, it is proposed, is of the essence of Christian faith.

What then are those secondary aspects, important for the welfare and development of faith yet not so essential that their absence would imply the non-existence of faith? All those external matters such as rites and ceremonies; structures, forms and customs. Faith, being an inward thing, will always be expressed in particular rites and ceremonies and will always give rise to particular structures and forms. It cannot do otherwise. Yet it must always be remembered that those outward aspects are but the outward manifestations of faith. The same faith may find expression in different and varying rites and give rise to different structures. Practically speaking, what is being referred to in terms of Christian practice? Forms of worship, the liturgy, styles of praying and singing; structures of church government and organisation; styles and patterns of leadership; rites of salvation, confession, restitution, remembrance and thanksgiving; sacramental rites such as baptism, eucharist, penance, foot-washing, anointing with oil; the number of sacraments practised, whether two or seven or none; special days for worship and celebration; marriage customs, funeral customs, initiation customs, coming of age customs; customs of dressing and eating and fasting - all these and many other things could be mentioned as secondary matters,

playing an important role in the life and order of the church and yet not to be confused with the very essence of the faith of the church.

These secondary aspects could themselves be further graded into another hierarchy. The rites of baptism and eucharist, for example, obviously play a more central and important role than marriage customs and customs of dress. The point being made, however, is that they are all secondary in that faith can exist without them. Faith in God and Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit does come into being even without the rites of baptism and eucharist, as valuable as the latter are for the *bene esse* of the church.

In summary, then, it is suggested that primary to Christian faith is simply trust in God and his grace, as he has made himself known to his covenant people Israel through the prophets and apostles and supremely through his only begotten Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate, the crucified and risen Saviour of the world. Implicit to this trust, of course, is always the ethical element of commitment and obedience. And secondary to the Christian faith are all those matters pertaining to the cult of this one true God, how he is worshipped and served by his people in the ordering of their lives as a community of faith. But does this suggested hierarchy of truths reflect the central thrust of teaching contained in the Christian Scriptures, the Old and New Testaments? To this question the following brief consideration of certain scriptural passages will be offered as an answer.

9.4 The witness of the Old Testament Does the OT have something that can be considered its centre - one single unifying concept? This question is closely related to our concern to ascertain the essence of faith in the OT. In his valuable work on OT theology Gerhard Hasel (1982:117-143) has provided something of an overview of the scholarly discussion around the above question, and it is of interest of note some of the suggestions that have been made. For Eichrodt, the central concept and convenient symbol for securing the unity of Biblical faith is the covenant. But Hasel questions whether the covenant concept is broad enough to include adequately the totality of OT reality (1982:119). Other

suggestions have been made. E. Sellin chooses as the central idea to guide him in his exposition of OT theology the holiness of God. For Ludwig Köhler the statement that God is Lord is the backbone of the OT. Hans Wildberger sees the election of Israel as the people of God to be the central concept of the OT. Horst Seebass has stressed the 'rulership of God' and Günther Klein argues for the kingdom of God as a central concept (Hasel 1983:119-120). Georg Fohrer prefers to see the dual concept of the rule of God and the communion between God and man as constituting the unifying element of the OT. In close agreement with him is Vriezen who maintains that OT theology must centre upon Israel's God in his relations to his people and the world and that the fundamental idea of communion between God and man is the best starting-point for a Biblical theology of the Old Testament (Hasel 1982:120-121). Gerhard von Rad initially maintained that the OT has no focal point, no centre which could serve as a unifying point in interpretation and understanding. Later, however, he inadvertently admitted to a centre, namely, the Deuteronomistic theology of history (Hasel 1982:123-130).

In more recent approaches W. H. Schmidt has suggested that one should be able to develop an OT theology from the centre of the exclusiveness of God as expressed in the first commandment. Closely related to Schmidt's proposed centre is that of Walter Zimmerli who believes that with the sentence 'I am Yahweh, your God' (Ex.20.2) comes the responding praise 'You ... Yahweh' (Dt.26.1) which emerges as a centre which is uniquely held on to in the entire OT history of tradition and interpretation. After surveying the aforementioned scholarly discussion, Hasel expresses doubts as to whether there is a single central concept that is sufficient and adequate in bringing about an organisation of the OT materials in a unity. The OT is too variegated and manifold. He does conclude that the OT is in its essence *theocentric* just as the NT is *christocentric*. In short, God is the dynamic, unifying centre of the OT, who introduces and identifies himself by great events in deeds and words, and it is around them that Israel responds in praise and worship, and that Biblical literature originates (Hasel 1982:130-140). It is striking that there is very little mention of ethics in the above discussion, unless we read into Eichrodt's emphasis on the covenant the concept of covenant keeping, or into

Vriezen's idea of communion the communion of faith and obedience. However, if we agree with Hasel's conclusion that God is the centre of the OT, then it follows that the essence of OT faith is trust in this God and obedience to his word.

If God is the centre of the OT who identifies himself by great events, then the greatest of these events in the history of the people of Israel was undoubtedly the Exodus event. This was the event recalled in so many of the rites, prayers and feasts of Israel, the event to which so many of the Hebrew scriptures bear witness. Thus it is that the summary of the whole law which we commonly call the ten commandments is introduced by a preamble in which it is declared: 'I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery' (Dt.5.6). Israel's faith is directed towards God, the only living and true God, Yahweh, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, the One who came down to save his people out of their distress and bondage in Egypt, who took them out of that land and gave them a land of their own where they might serve him in holiness all their days. And the implications for ancient Israel of what it means to trust and serve this God are spelled out in the ethical requirements that follow: the prohibitions against idolatry, blasphemy, murder, adultery, theft, deceit and covetousness and the injunctions to honour parents and keep the Sabbath rest. John Bright summed up the heart of Israel's faith as follows:

Israel's notion of God was unique in the ancient world, and a phenomenon that defies rational explanation. Nevertheless, to understand her faith in terms of an idea of God is a fundamental error, and one that is bound to lead to a misreading of the entire Old Testament. Israel's religion rested in no abstract theological propositions, but in the memory of historical experience as interpreted by, and responded to, in faith. She believed that Yahweh, her God, had by his mighty acts rescued her from Egypt and, in covenant, had made her his people (Bright 1976:144).

The famous *shema* of Deuteronomy expresses what J. A. Thompson (1974:121) calls 'the heart of Israel's confession' in the words: 'Hear, O Israel:

the LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts' (Dt. 6. 4-6). Again, a little later in the same book we find a similar exhortation to trust in Yahweh, the God of Israel, and to keep his ways:

And now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the LORD's commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good? (Dt. 10. 12-13).

In the practical outworking of Israel's faith in the life of the people there inevitably and necessarily developed a special cult of worship and service, centred on the temple in Jerusalem and supported by a chosen caste of priests who carried out a variety of sacrifices and other ritual acts on specially appointed days throughout the year. All of this was by divine command according to detailed instructions in the sacred books. So important was this official cult of worship and sacrifice that a prophet such as Haggai could make the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem the central focus of his prophetic ministry. Yet the possibility of performing the external rites of the cult without any real trust in God and true obedience to his commands was sharply pointed out by many of the later prophets:

"The multitude of your sacrifices - what are they to me?" says the LORD. "I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations - I cannot bear your evil assemblies. Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood; wash and

make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow." (Is. 1.11-17).

In this passage we see a clear distinction between the primary and secondary aspects of faith. Almost the entire cult - sacrifices, liturgical prayers, feasts and festivals - is dismissed as worthless because of the absence of what is primary to the faith of Israel, trust in God and an ethical lifestyle in the fear of the LORD. 'Every religion has its necessary outward forms,' comments Alec Motyer (1993:45), 'and every religion is susceptible to the same danger of defining the reality in terms of the form. ... [Isaiah] was issuing a call to return to the primitive integration of the two elements of ethics and rite.' Hosea says the same thing when he declares on behalf of the Lord: 'For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings' (Hosea 6.6). And virtually all the prophets struck the same note in their ministries (eg Micah 6.8; Amos 5.21-24).

In a more positive way the psalms bear witness to the essence of Israel's faith. J. G. S. Thomson (1970:1057) comments concerning the Psalms, 'It is interesting to notice the lack of emphasis on the sacrificial system in the temple cultus.' Even those references that there are to the official cult are usually in the context of prayers of repentance, praise, intercession or thanksgiving. Far greater attention in the psalms is focused on God himself, Yahweh, the God of Israel, who 'remembers his covenant for ever, the word he commanded, for a thousand generations, the covenant he made with Abraham, the oath he swore to Isaac. He confirmed it to Jacob as a decree, to Israel as an everlasting covenant: "To you I will give the land of Canaan as the portion you will inherit"' (Ps. 105.8-11). Again and again the mighty acts of Yahweh are recounted, when he saved and delivered his people, especially the Exodus event. These continual reminders were intended to encourage the people of Israel to put their trust entirely in their God and to seek his ways so that they too might experience his saving help.

It cannot be said too often that the Psalter is a mirror which reflects not so much the religious experience of individuals as the experience of 'the religious soul of Israel' conceived as a corporate personality. ... And this religion of the individual before God as reflected in the Psalter was supremely an expression of confident trust in the Lord, of praise to God, of acceptance with God. It was rooted in obedience to the law of God and of fellowship with God (Thomson 1970:1057).

9.5 The witness of the New Testament The distinction between what is here being called the primary and secondary aspects of Israel's faith is brought out in sharp relief in the teaching of Jesus. When asked to identify the greatest commandment in the Law, Jesus simply quoted the words of the *shema*: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind' (Mt.22.37). And to spell out clearly the ethical implications of what it means to love God and trust in him, he added: 'Love your neighbour as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments' (Mt.22.39). The preaching of Jesus is summarized in the synoptic gospels as 'the good news of the kingdom of God' (Lk.4.43), a message calculated to turn the hearts and minds of people to God, the One mighty in power who reigns over all, that they might trust in him. When it came to matters of ritual observance Jesus was no iconoclast. He did not reject all religious externals as a matter of principle. On the contrary, he adhered to all the rites of religious observance as would any pious Jew. He refused, however, to subject the primary aspects of an ethically orientated faith in God to the various details of cultic observance. Typical of his stance in this matter were his words to the Pharisees:

Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practised the latter without leaving the former undone (Lk. 11.42).

In like manner he refused to allow contemporary customs of Sabbath observance to take precedence over a ministry of mercy and healing. 'The

Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath' (Mk.2.27). A secondary issue of ritual observance, valuable as it may be as an expression of faith and for the enhancement of faith, may not be regarded as being of the very essence of faith. On the issue of clean and unclean foods, again Jesus pointed to the primary issue of serving God from a pure and holy heart as being of greater importance than the secondary issue of the eating of clean foods (Mk. 7.17-23). Similar instances could be quoted with regard to customs of fasting and cleansing and other ritual observances.

In the teaching and ministry of Jesus we see clear continuity with the faith of Israel in the Old Testament, especially as manifested in the prophets. But can we assume an essential unity in the faith of the various New Testament writers? Does the NT have a unifying centre? Not all scholars have thought so. Käsemann believed that by and large there is no internal coherence in the NT which is filled with tensions which amount at times to irreconcilable theological contradictions. Likewise H. Braun, another pupil of Bultmann, has pushed the diversity of the NT to the extremes of total disparity, denying any unifying centre, except, perhaps, a certain theological anthropology in which the mutual contradictions of the NT might be overcome (Hasel 1978:142-146). Most scholars, however, see an essential christocentric unity in the NT. B. Reicke suggests that in the Christ-event there is the material unity of the NT. F.C Grant, P. Robertson, E. Lohse and many other Catholic and Protestant scholars recognise in Jesus Christ the centre of the NT. For them the centre and manifoldness of the NT expressions are found in the once-for-all Christ event on the cross in which God's love for the world was manifested (Hasel 1978:155-160).

We affirm, then, that for the apostolic faith of the NT the coming of Jesus was the supreme and definitive revelation of God to his people, the coming of God in mighty saving power to redeem his people from sin and bondage. The crucifixion, resurrection and ascension of Jesus constitute a new exodus event (ἐξοδος Luke 9.31), laying the foundation for a new covenant whereby the Pentecostal gift of the Holy Spirit is poured out upon the Israel of God, destined now in a new and better dispensation to embrace all the various tribes and peoples of the earth. The apostolic

message is still summarized as the good news of the kingdom of God (Acts 28.31) and the goal of that preaching is faith in Jesus as the Son of God, the incarnate Word of God who has come to make known the Father and to reconcile all people to the Father, the one true and living God, the God of Abraham, the God of Israel.

In this new community of faith, bound together by a common faith in Christ and him crucified, some of the old rites fall away as being now obsolete as they had primary reference to one particular ethnically defined people, belonging to one particular geographically bound land. But the new community of faith must develop new rites, new patterns of worship, new structures and new holy days of special observance. Therefore the distinction between primary and secondary aspects of the faith still remain. Primary to Christian faith is still faith in the one, true and living God, especially as he has made himself known through the marvelous and gracious salvation wrought through Jesus the Messiah. And inherent in that faith is still the ethical element, obedience to the law, now summed up as the law of love (Rm. 13.8-10; Gal. 5.14). Of secondary importance to the Christian faith are still all those outward matters of rites, customs, structures and observances, important for the initiation, celebration and renewal of faith and the good ordering of the life of the community, but not of the very essence of faith and trust in God.

Can evidences of this distinction be found in the apostolic writings? Certainly, despite the fact that the documents of the New Testament were produced in the time of the foundation of the church, a time of transition when many of the old rites were still being practised and the new rites just beginning to be developed. Nevertheless, the principle is clearly there. When reference is made, for example, to certain things 'without which no one shall enter the kingdom of God' the reference is always to matters of faith and morals/ethics. On the other hand there is always a certain flexibility when it comes to matters of rites and external practices, a tendency to downplay their importance in comparison to faith, love and righteousness. In his comments on Paul's statement 'A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical' (Rm. 2.28), Leon Morris observes the following:

It was membership in the covenant of which circumcision was the sign that mattered. And covenant membership meant keeping the covenant. Without that, even the circumcised Israelite had no standing with God. Many commentators point out that Christian readers should remember that what is said here of circumcision applies with equal force to baptism (Morris 1992:140).

The New Testament documents consistently exalt the importance of faith. 'Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him' (Heb.11.6). 'Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life' (Jn.3.36). 'Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life' (Jn.5.24). If it be asked what is the object of this faith, the answer is Christ himself, the good news of God's mighty act of salvation through Jesus the Messiah. Paul summed up this good news as follows:

Now brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve (1 Cor.15.1-5).

For Paul, the heart of saving faith was faith in God and his mighty acts wrought through Jesus the Messiah for the salvation of his people. Such faith was necessarily accompanied by an ethical lifestyle characterized by righteousness, love and holiness without which 'no one will see the Lord' (Heb.12.14). To the Corinthians Paul gave the solemn warning: 'Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God' (1 Cor.6.9-10). Echoes of the decalogue can be heard in Paul's warning. In other places Paul stresses that all the commandments, whatever they may

be, are summed up in this one rule: 'Love your neighbour as yourself' (Rom.13.9). Without this love, there is no Christian faith, there is nothing (1 Cor.13). Faith working through love is the burden also of the Johannine writings as well as the letter of James. For the Christian, faith in God is faith in Christ and love is the summary of the law.

If such faith working through love (which is faith in Christ as Saviour and Lord) is the primary aspect of the Christian faith, without which there is nothing, then what are those secondary aspects concerning which differences and variations are legitimate? All outward matters of rites and observances. Matters concerning foods: 'The man who eats everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand (Rom.14.3-4). The observance of special days: 'One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind' (Rom.14.5-6). The rite of circumcision: 'Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation' (Gal.6.15).

But would it be right to include the rite of baptism among those aspects of Christianity that are here being labeled secondary? In a way this whole thesis labours to answer that question, but a few preliminary observations can be made at this point. In the later ending of the Gospel of Mark (almost certainly not written by Mark, but reflecting nevertheless an early Christian tradition), the commission to evangelise the world is followed by the words: 'Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned' (Mark 16.16). It is surely significant that while baptism is closely connected to faith, it is not given the primary role that faith has in determining the eternal destiny of the hearer. In one of the very few references to the baptising ministry of Jesus, it is explicitly mentioned that 'in fact it was not Jesus who baptised, but his disciples' (Jn.4.2). This reminds us of the remark of Paul to the Corinthians: 'For Christ did not send me to baptise, but to preach the gospel' (1 Cor.1.17). While we cannot press these isolated passages to tell us too much about baptism, neither can we ignore the

clear impression that the administration of baptism is not ranked with the preaching of the faith in order of importance. The tentative suggestion, then, is that the rite of baptism can be included among those rites and observances that constitute a secondary aspect of Christianity, secondary in importance to the primary aspects of faith and love.

Aware of how easily the last sentence above could be misunderstood, it must be emphasized again that the intention is not to trivialize the importance of baptism. Baptism in New Testament times was the ordinary way of receiving salvation through Christ and the refusal of baptism would have been a refusal of Christ. Yet it remains true that certain instances in the biblical narratives (Cornelius, the thief on the cross) and the history of the church (Quakers, the Salvation Army) remind us that salvation and union with Christ are not necessarily dependent on the rite of baptism.

9.6 Summary All the above can be summarised in the conclusion that there is a hierarchy of truths in the Christian faith. There are those aspects of primary importance which constitute the very essence of faith: faith in God, faith in the gospel, the good news of God's redemption of the world through his Son. Also of primary importance are the ethical implications of faith: obedience to Christ's commands, a life of love. Those aspects of secondary importance include all those matters of outward observance; special days and feasts; rites and ceremonies; structures and forms. While it is the life of love and faith that binds Christians together in one body through the power of the Holy Spirit, it is possible for Christians to differ from one another in secondary matters without being alienated from one another or from the life of God in the body of Christ. Indeed secondary matters must not be allowed to separate Christians from one another. To do so would be to grieve the Holy Spirit who is the Spirit of love and unity.

Obligation is laid upon Christians to accept those whom God has accepted, 'without passing judgement on disputable matters' (Rom. 14.1). And who are those whom God has accepted? - those who believe in his Son. Faith in Jesus Christ according to the Scriptures is the common bond between

Christians, and though there be a thousand disputable matters, not one of them, or even all of them put together, are adequate grounds for Christians to break fellowship and communion with one another.

CHAPTER 10

SOME CASE STUDIES AND THE BEM DOCUMENT

10.1 Introduction This chapter can be divided into three main sections. In the first section (10.2) four independent congregations in the Cape Peninsular region are examined. In the second section (10.3) a major denomination in India in which both paedobaptist and credobaptist churches have united is considered, along with a few other similar schemes for church union which are still under discussion. The third section (10.4) contains a consideration of the Faith and Order Paper No. 111 *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (BEM).

On the one hand the Cape Peninsular congregations studied are small, isolated and theologically unsophisticated. The BEM document and the Church of North India, on the other hand, are the product of theological experts representing major ecclesiastical traditions throughout the world. But common to all is the attempt to bridge the baptismal divide and to find a position in which people of differing baptismal convictions can co-exist in the same fellowship, worship and service.

10.2 Four congregations in the Cape Peninsular region Practice is always more difficult than theory, and finding churches which genuinely made room for differing baptismal practices was not easy. There were many false leads. There are many united churches that unite different denominational traditions in one congregation but yet adhere firmly to one baptismal tradition, either paedobaptist or credobaptist. The United Christian Fellowship was found to have no room for Paedobaptists within its fellowship. The Noordhoek United Church (a fruit of the Church Unity Commission in South Africa) made no provision for the convictions of Baptists within its unity.

Of the following churches, the Kommertjie Christian Church and the Hermanus United Church seemed to be the best examples of churches that

permit Christians both to hold and practise differing baptismal positions, and so more space has been devoted to them. The other churches are more pronouncedly credobaptist in their orientation, but have been included because of the (occasional) occurrence within them of infant baptisms.

10.2.1 Kommetjie Christian Church Kommetjie is a seaside village on the western side of the Cape Peninsular. The church traces its earliest beginnings back to 1925 when it started life as a preaching post of the Bible Institute of Kalk Bay and a Brethren Sunday school. The founding members of church included a Lutheran, a Presbyterian, a Methodist and a Dutch Reformed. The present trustees of the church are still predominantly Paedobaptists but also include a Baptist. The present minister is a Baptist (Wolfaardt 1993).

The original constitution of the church contained a statement of faith which confessed the following concerning baptism:

We believe in the ordinances of Baptism and the Lord's Supper as being instituted by our Lord Jesus Christ, but not in Baptism as conveying regenerating grace, neither in the Lord's Supper as being a sacrifice for sin, nor involving any change in the substance of the bread and wine (Extract of a special resolution 1968:2).

This article of faith has remained unchanged in all the subsequent constitutions produced and approved by the church. The original constitution made no mention of how baptism was to be administered and to whom. This was clarified in a later version of the church's constitution, approved probably some time in the 1980's, which stipulated the following:

Baptism is the confession of the believer by means of water as an identification with the Lord Jesus Christ in His burial and resurrection.

The ordinance will be performed on request for:-

- * believers who wish to be immersed as a confession of their faith,
- * the children of believers as the parents promise to raise their

children in the Christian faith.

(The Constitution of the Kommetjie Christian Church [s al: 2]).

There is, however, something of an inconsistency in the above clauses which define baptism in terms of believers' baptism and then allow infant baptism. Doubtless it was the awareness of this inconsistency that led to changes in the above clauses in a later version of the church's constitution (still in force in 1993) so that they read as follows:

Baptism is an identification with the Lord Jesus Christ in His burial and resurrection as a sign of the gospel. Some understand this to refer to the baptism of believers and others to the baptism of the children of believing parents.

The ordinance will be performed on request for:-

- * believers who wish to be immersed as a confession of their faith,
- * the children of believers as the parents promise to raise their children in the Christian faith.

(Kommetjie Christian Church Constitution [s al:2]).

This is clearly an improvement on the previous wording as it frankly recognises differences in the understanding of baptism. The statement could be made even more accurate if it read 'Some understand this to refer to the baptism of believers only and others to the baptism of the children of believing parents also.' But perhaps this must await a future revision of the constitution!

Those wishing to have their infants baptised are first interviewed by the pastor of the church. If he feels they have no theological basis for their request but are acting simply out of custom, he will seek to enlighten them concerning the meaning and purpose of baptism and will suggest to them the alternative of having their infants dedicated. Apparently about 40% of the parents who initially ask for their children to be baptised end up having them dedicated. If the parents requesting baptism for their children show they have an understanding of the significance of the

sacrament and are persuaded that there is a theological basis for it, the pastor arranges for the baptism to be conducted without hesitation. A paedobaptist minister (usually Church of England in South Africa or Presbyterian) is approached to administer the baptism in the church during a regular Sunday morning service (Wolfaardt 1993).

Those desiring baptism as believers are counselled by the pastor who administers the sacrament himself, usually in the Fish Hoek Baptist church, as the Kommetjie Christian Church does not have a baptistry suitable for the immersion of adults. In the three years that the present pastor has been at the church there have been four instances of infant baptism and twenty five instances of believers' baptism.

The present pastor of the church admits to experiencing some personal struggle in reconciling his strong commitment to Christian unity with his Baptist convictions. He professes to have no desire to change the inclusive nature of the church's baptismal policy but rather genuinely appreciates it and the sense of wider unity it fosters. He also admits that over a period of time the perspective of the incumbent pastor tends to prevail in the church and feels he cannot conceal his own Baptist convictions. He also enthusiastically participates in the local interdenominational ministers fraternal (Wolfaardt 1993).

Life in the Kommetjie Christian Church has not been without some conflict over the issue of baptism. Something of a watershed was reached in 1992 when on one occasion the pastor mentioned the subject of baptism from the pulpit and made an invitation for those interested in being baptised as believers to attend some baptismal classes that he would be holding. As a result of these classes a sizable group of people decided to be baptised as believers. The baptism was conducted at the Fish Hoek Baptist Church but the baptismal certificates were handed out on the following Sunday morning at the regular service in the Kommetjie church and those baptised were commended for their obedience. This caused an outcry among some of the members of the church who felt that such a commendation implied that Paedobaptists were disobedient to the Lord. The Trustees of the church were called in to address the situation. After carefully examining the

circumstances surrounding the statements made they did not find the pastor at fault as he had been willing to equally commend Paedobaptists for their obedience to conscience in bringing their children to baptism (Wolfaardt 1993).

Of particular interest was an interview with a leading member of the Kommertjie church who was of paedobaptist persuasion. Gavin, as we shall call him, has been five years with the church during which time he has functioned as a deacon, youth leader and Sunday School superintendent. Brought up in a Methodist home, his parents were active and committed Christians. He was first challenged in his thinking about baptism when at University. In the group of Christian students of which he was a part many were being baptised as believers as a result of the spiritual renewal or new found faith they were experiencing. After thinking through the issue seriously Gavin decided not to get rebaptised, believing that his baptism as an infant was a valid baptism, particularly in the light of the reality of his parents' faith. After listening to an exposition of the biblical case for infant baptisms he also became convinced that infant baptism has a sound theological basis. His marriage to a girl from a Brethren background, with definite credobaptist views further complicated the issue. It is not surprising that such a couple should gravitate to a church like the Kommertjie Christian Church with its inclusive baptismal policy. In their case they decided not to have their children baptised, though it would have been possible according to the church's constitution (probably in deference to the wife's feelings) (Keller 1993).

When asked about the incident referred to above when some conflict was experienced over the question of baptism, Gavin replied that it had been a traumatic experience when some did feel very threatened, feeling that unfair pressure was being put on them. One couple actually left the church, although there were probably also other reasons behind their decision. He himself felt there had been a tendency to exaggerate the importance of the issue on all sides. He did, though, confess to a feeling of distress when attempts were made by some to evaluate Christians according to their baptismal views. He also noted that the Kommetjie Christian Church had no formal structure of confirmation classes for those

who had been baptised as infants. When, in response to requests for such classes, a series of confirmation classes were run, only one of the class was admitted to membership in the church after examination by the leadership of the church. This also caused some dissatisfaction in the church. However, notwithstanding the above comments, Gavin felt that those of paedobaptist persuasion were not discriminated against in the church. He cited a recent example of an infant baptism in the church where the pastor and the whole congregation participated enthusiastically in the service which was characterized by a warm and loving spirit. The parents of the infant baptised, a couple from a Dutch Reformed background, were entirely satisfied with the way the service was conducted.

10.2.2 Hermanus United Church On January 26, 1947, the following resolution was passed unanimously by a company of people numbering thirty five in the hall of the Dutch Reformed Church at Hermanus:

That we, as a gathering of Christian believers do hereby under the guidance of God solemnly constitute ourselves into an interdenominational fellowship of believers to be known as the United Church, Hermanus (Trust Deed 1990:1).

At the time of the establishment of the church, Hermanus was a small coastal village a little more than a hundred kilometers east of Cape Town. The two major sponsoring bodies in the establishment of this church were the Congregationalists and the Baptists. Neither of these two bodies felt that their adherents were sufficient to support a church on their own. The Hermanus United Church was also envisaged as providing a spiritual home for other Christians as well, particularly those belonging to any of the Protestant free church traditions. Indeed, included in the United Committee responsible for the establishment of the church were representatives of the Methodist, Presbyterian, Congregational and Baptist Churches of the then Union of South Africa (Trust Deed 1990:1).

The constitution of the church makes no mention of baptism at all. Concerning eligibility for membership, it declares: 'A person shall be

eligible for membership by reason of being a member of any Christian Church, or by confession of faith' (Trust Deed 1990:3). At another place the constitution states: 'Every member upon being admitted shall make the Declaration of Faith and sign the Membership Book.' The Declaration of Faith referred to is the following:

I believe in God the Father,
God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

I believe in Jesus Christ, the Redeemer
of the World, the Saviour of men.

I believe in the forgiveness of sins
and the life Everlasting

(Trust Deed 1990:2).

The church has had a succession of ministers from both the Baptist and the Paedobaptist traditions. In fact the church has endeavoured to vary the ministers as to their ecclesiastical affiliations so as to reflect the interdenominational character of the church. The previous minister was a Methodist minister. The present pastor is a Baptist minister. It is of interest that some of the previous Baptist ministers administered the rite of baptism to infants in those cases where it was requested of them. The present minister, when being interviewed in connection with a possible call to the pastorate of the church, was asked if he would be willing to baptise infants when requested. He answered that he would not in good conscience be able to do that himself, but that he would make it clear that he respected the convictions of those requesting such a baptism and would make the necessary arrangements for the baptism to be carried out (Gilfillan 1993).

When a couple desire to have their infant baptised, they approach the pastor who shares with them his own understanding of baptism while emphasizing at the same time that the church fully recognises both forms of baptism (infant baptism and believers' baptism). He will then arrange for a retired Methodist minister who is a member of the congregation to administer the baptism. This takes place in the church during the course of a regular Sunday morning service. There is also, at present, a retired Congregational minister in the congregation, so there is no shortage of

ministers within the church willing to administer infant baptism (Gilfillan 1993).

The baptism of believers is carried out by the minister himself, but not in the church as it does not have a suitable baptistry. Such baptisms are carried out in the church building of the Pinkster Protestante Kerk which gladly makes its premises available for such occasions.

During the three years ministry of the present pastor of the Hermanus United Church some twenty infants have been baptised and a number have been blessed in a service of dedication. Three people have been baptised as believers. These figures reflect to some extent the constituency of the church, in which most members and adherents come from churches within the paedobaptist tradition.

In answer to the question of what problems, difficulties or complaints had arisen in the church around the subject of baptism, the pastor was able to reply that he was not aware of any tensions, difficulties or strife that had troubled the church in the three years he had been there. There seems to have been no complaints from any section of the church of prejudice against some or other baptismal viewpoint. This is despite the fact that the present pastor has expounded those passages of Scripture mentioning baptism in accordance with his own Baptist convictions. But in doing so he has always shown respect for paedobaptist views, recognising the integrity of those who hold them. The general peace that seems to prevail in the church, particularly with regard to baptismal questions, seemed quite remarkable in the view of the interviewer, and the pastor was unable to recall one single comment on the subject indicating any unhappiness in the church (Gilfillan 1993).

Finally it can be mentioned that the Hermanus United Church enjoys excellent relationships with other churches in Hermanus, such as the Anglicans, Church of England in South Africa, the Dutch Reformed Church, the Pinkster Protestante Kerk and others. The minister of the church serves as the chairman of the local ministers fraternal.

10.2.3 Kleinmond Evangelical Fellowship Kleinmond is a coastal town about a hundred kilometers east of Cape Town. The church was established in the early 1980's, largely through the efforts of a Baptist couple. It has maintained a fairly strong Baptist ethos although membership of the church is open 'to all interested persons, irrespective of Church affiliations, who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as their personal Saviour and Lord; and accept the Terms and Conditions set forth in this Constitution' (Kleinmond Constitution [s a]:4).

There seems to be some inconsistency in the official position of the church, for while membership is open to all believers, irrespective of whether they have been baptised as believers or infants, article 11 of the Declaration of Faith states: 'That baptism, being symbolic of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and expressing openly the inward experience of spiritual regeneration, be carried out by the method of total immersion of a Believer in water, in obedience to our Lord's Command' (Kleinmond Constitution [s a]:3). Notwithstanding this clause, there are quite a few of paedobaptist persuasion in fellowship and in membership with the church and, indeed, the baptism of infants is permitted in the church (Mathew 1993).

While the baptism of infants may be permitted, it is certainly not encouraged in the church. Many of those initially approaching the church for the baptism of their children have ended up having their children blessed in a ceremony of infant dedication in the church. In the eleven years since the inception of the church there has only been one instance of the baptism of an infant in the church. (It must be remembered that quite a large percentage of the church adherents and members are retired people.) This would have been administered by a paedobaptist minister (most likely Methodist) specially invited for the occasion. The baptism of believers has been somewhat more frequent, although, interestingly, the church does not have a baptistry for such occasions and so use is made of the private swimming pools of members. In the first six months of 1993 about three or four people have been so baptised. The church does not have a full-time pastor, although recently it has appointed one of its members

who has functioned many years in a leadership capacity as an honorary pastor (Mathew 1993).

Despite the Baptist leanings of the church, the majority of the regular adherents (those who regularly attend services at the church and who would identify themselves with it although they have not become full members of it) are of paedobaptist persuasion. Among those who are full members of the church, a majority are of Baptist persuasion, but not all. Among its adherents the church would include Dutch Reformed, Lutherans, a Catholic couple, Church of England in South Africa and Presbyterians (Mathew 1993).

The present pastor reports that there has been a remarkable peace in the church concerning the baptism question. In the last eleven years there has been a virtual complete absence of any problems, strife or conflict in connection with matters of baptism. He quoted the remarks of a visitor to the church who once commented that the church was "as close as possible to the perfect church" (Mathew 1993).

10.2.4 Hangklip Evangelical Fellowship Betty's Bay, the village where this church is situated, is a small coastal village not far from Kleinmond in the Western Cape. It consists largely of holiday homes where people come to spend their holidays or to retire. There are some, however, who commute from Betty's Bay to their place of employment in Cape Town. The church has been in existence for about six years and was planted largely through the instrumentality of Jim and Betty Turvey, a couple with a Baptist background, who also played a role in the planting of the Kleinmond Evangelical Fellowship. Information about this church was gathered through an interview with a Mrs Droomer who is part of a committee of eight people (three women and five men) who have oversight over the church.

When the constitution of the church was being drawn up some were in favour of committing the church to a policy of believers' baptism. Others resisted this and eventually it was agreed that the constitution of the church should be inclusive of both infant baptism and believers' baptism.

Article 9 of the church's 'Declaration of Faith' on Baptism states the following:

We believe that Jesus Christ commanded that all Christians be baptised.

Believers' Baptism is symbolic of the death and resurrection of our Lord, and expresses openly the inward experience of spiritual regeneration.

Infant Baptism (followed later by confirmation) brings an infant, whose parents are Christians, into God's promised Covenantal relationship.

On request, either form of baptism will be administered.

(Hangklip Constitution [s a]:4).

Something of a crisis arose in the church when one of the committee members who had strongly argued in favour of an inclusive constitution felt led to be baptised as a believer. The minister who had been invited to conduct the baptism preached a sermon that included comments that were critical of certain paedobaptist churches. Despite the unhappiness caused by this incident, the inclusive nature of the church survived, and the lady involved continued to be in favour of this policy. Indeed, the congregation seems to be about evenly divided between those who would be favourably inclined towards the baptism of infants and those who would not be so inclined (Droomer 1993).

Not having an ordained minister of their own, the church does not conduct any baptisms itself, but always invites a minister from elsewhere to perform any baptisms that have been requested. Only one infant has been baptised in the church (the members are largely retired folk) and a Methodist minister was obtained to perform the rite. One person has requested baptism as a believer, and this was performed in the private swimming pool of one of the members by a visiting preacher from the Vineyard Fellowship. One baby has also been blessed in a service of dedication in the church building. A few requests for the baptism of infants have been declined by the church on the grounds that the parents involved were in no way connected to or known by the church which could

not therefore vouch for their spiritual standing as believers. The position of the church is that it would only consider requests for the baptism of infants where the parents gave evidence of being committed believers (Droomer 1993).

10.3 Church union schemes involving Baptist denominations

10.3.1 Introduction Instances of Baptist denominations becoming involved in church union schemes with paedobaptist denominations are very rare. Yet there is one notable such instance, namely, the Church of North India, and some attention will be given to this church and to how they were able to 'bridge the gap'. Furthermore, there are some other instances of discussions towards church union in progress in which Baptist churches are involved, and these too will be examined briefly.

10.3.2 The Church of North India The churches that participated in the *Plan of Church Union in North India and Pakistan* included the Church of India, Pakistan, Burma and Ceylon (Anglican), the Methodist Church, the United Church of Northern India, the Church of the Brethren in India, the Disciples of Christ, the Mennonites and the Council of Baptist Churches in North India (Lorenzen 1978:257).

This union became possible because the plan of union provided that 'both infant baptism and believers' baptism shall be accepted as alternative practices in the Church of North India.' In fact, Baptists, Disciples and Brethren continue to practise only believers' baptism by immersion. However, if a member of a congregation requests the baptism of an infant, then the minister may, for conscience sake, call in a colleague to perform it (Lorenzen 1978:258).

According to the *Plan of Church Union in North India and Pakistan*, full communicant membership in the Church of North India is limited to those who are baptized and 'give evidence of repentance, faith and love towards Jesus Christ...' This means a person may become a member either through

infant baptism plus a 'public confession of faith' in which 'he affirms his acceptance of the baptism administered to him in infancy' (confirmation), or through infant dedication plus believers' baptism. In both cases (confirmation and believers' baptism) 'prayer for the gift of the Holy Spirit, the laying-on of hands by the bishop or presbyter, and acknowledgment of his attaining the full responsibilities of Church membership' are part of the liturgy (Lorenzen 1978:258).

Also according to the *Plan of Church Union* baptism in whatever form is a once for all event and therefore unrepeatable. 'Rebaptism' is ruled out. If any persons should persistently maintain that only their baptism as believers would satisfy their conscience, although they were baptised in infancy, the minister concerned will refer the matter to the bishop of the diocese for pastoral advice and direction. Ministers within the Church of North India may speak about baptism but they are instructed to refrain from any attempt to persuade those who were brought up in either of the accepted practices of the Church to adopt the alternative practice for themselves or for their children (Lorenzen 1978:258).

The Church of North India represents an admirable effort to bring together in one visible fellowship Christians from differing baptismal traditions, and as such is an important ecumenical milestone in this process. A careful look at their *Plan of Church Union*, however, will show that Baptists and others in the credobaptist tradition have given up considerably more than those participating churches from the paedobaptist tradition. Baptists, for example, are free to change their minds on baptismal issues and to request the baptism of their infant children. And even if the Baptist pastor cannot personally administer this baptism, for reasons of conscience, he is able (and expected) to call in a colleague to perform it. Paedobaptists, however, are not given the same freedom. Should they experience a change of conviction on baptismal matters, they are not permitted to seek baptism in the way their conscience might lead them as any 'rebaptism' is ruled out. Although the provision is made for such cases to be referred to the bishop for pastoral advice and direction, there is no indication that the individual involved might be granted permission to be baptised as he or she desires.

It is not surprising, perhaps, that many Baptists, including those with genuine ecumenical desires, would be wary of entering a union of churches such as the one outlined above, as it would appear to them to unfairly inhibit the free expression and practise of honestly held Baptist convictions.

10.3.3 The proposed Church of North-East India In 1963 negotiations began to form the Church of North-East India which was expected to represent 93% of the non-Roman Catholic Christians of North-East India, most of whom are either Baptists or Presbyterians. Some of the key points of this proposed union, as far as baptism is concerned, can be seen in the following points of the suggested constitution:

2. The sacrament of baptism is a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of union with Christ in his body, of forgiveness of sins in his blood, of death to sin and rebirth to eternal life through him. By this sacrament we are solemnly admitted into the household of faith for the life-long service of Jesus Christ.

3. The Church of North-East India allows both infant baptism and believers' baptism but not both on the same person and shall receive as communicant members all those who have been baptized or confirmed. It assures freedom of expression for the particular convictions of different traditions.

4. All ministers of the church shall be free to administer either or both forms of baptism. A minister who, for conscientious reasons, is unable to administer baptism to infants shall be free to invite some other ministers of the Church to perform the rite (Lorenzen 1978:259).

A strong point of the above proposed constitution is the freedom that is assured to be able to express the particular convictions of different traditions. It could be asked, however, whether this freedom could not be extended to be able to *put into practice* particular convictions, even if this meant, on occasion, the practise of what others would see as 'rebaptism'? The question of rebaptism is, of course, a deeply sensitive one to many - as is the question of infant baptism to others. No Baptist

could want to enter into ecumenical relations with other Christians without being sensitive to this issue. Ideally, this sensitivity and concern not to offend others would, in most cases, be sufficient to refrain from what others would see as rebaptism. To allow complete freedom in the matter would be to run the risk of actions taken that would offend some. But the question remains whether such a risky freedom is still not preferable to a prohibition (of rebaptism) that would violate the conscience of a few.

In 1934 discussions began concerning a proposed church union scheme for the churches of Ceylon. The proposals are essentially the same as those discussed above in the case of the Church of North India and the proposed Church of North-East India. So no further comment will be made.

10.3.4 The report of the Churches of Christ and the United Reformed Church This report was produced in England, and the particular issue of rebaptism is dealt with in the following paragraph:

The joint Committee recognises, however, that such a dual practice will require respect for the rights of conscience at certain points and will only be possible if the adherents of each practice accept their common obligation to build up each other in the faith. It will be necessary to ensure that no one practice or mode of baptism will be forced upon either ministers or people contrary to conscience. Any attempt to do so would impede real union. More difficult is the case of someone baptised in infancy who comes to believe that baptism can only be administered to a believer and therefore requests believers' baptism. Such cases will have to be dealt with pastorally and the depth of the issues involved will have to be taken fully into account. Because baptism is more than an individual act, in such cases the conscientious convictions of ministers and congregations are involved as well as those of the individual. It would be inappropriate in a Basis of Union to try to make detailed provision for all the cases which might arise. The Committee therefore proposes simply the addition of a footnote to the paragraph on Baptism (of the

Basis of Union of the United Reformed Church) requiring such cases to be handled pastorally (Mathews 1976:25-26).

The above paragraph shows a fine sensitivity to and real appreciation of the issues involved with sympathetic insight to both sides. As such, the paragraph serves as a model for other Christians and churches seeking to bridge the gap between differing baptismal traditions. The possibility remains, however, that the one to whom 'such cases' are referred for pastoral guidance might not sympathetically understand the dilemma they find themselves in. If the possibility of a service of believers' baptism was precluded, then, as Mathews (1976:26) puts it, 'many Baptists would continue to affirm that to refuse to baptise someone in these situations challenges the freedom of that individual before God; it means the tacit acceptance of the complete validity and normality of infant baptism and involves Baptists in being asked to go beyond the proper demands of the charity of Christian fellowship.'

10.4 The BEM document

10.4.1 Introduction Quite different to the above case studies which have focused on individual congregations and regional church unions in their attempts to bridge the baptismal divide, here we examine an international effort involving some of the keenest theological minds in hundreds of different churches from every corner of the world. The fruit of this effort has been the production of a text which has sought to express the faith of the Church through the ages. Here we shall consider briefly something of the process by which the BEM text came into being, the text itself, and some of the responses to the text from various churches world wide.

10.4.2 The development of the BEM document From the very outset of the Faith and Order Movement, beginning with the first world conference at Lausanne in 1927, baptism and the eucharist have been the subject of theological discussions in the ecumenical movement. No important conference of the Faith and Order conference ever took place

without at least some reference to these two sacraments (Thurian 1991:81). In 1961 a report entitled "One Lord, One Baptism" was favourably received by the Montreal conference. The study on baptism was resumed in 1967 and after a number of consultations a report was submitted to the Commission on Faith and Order at its meeting in Louvain (1971) entitled "Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist". At the Commission's request, the WCC executive committee decided to send the document to all member churches for their reactions and comments. In the light of the responses received from the churches, the text was then amended and again submitted to the Faith and Order commission at its meeting in Accra in 1974 (Thurian 1991:81).

The document produced by Accra was again sent to the churches for their reactions and the evaluation of the amendments proposed by the churches enabled a smaller steering group to bring the BEM text closer to the final form that it would receive at Lima in 1982.

The great majority of scholars who have been involved in the production of the BEM text have been drawn from the great paedobaptist traditions. There has been, however, some Baptist involvement. The BEM steering group mentioned above comprised of two Orthodox, a Lutheran, two Reformed, a Roman Catholic, a member of the Taizé community and a Methodist. A number of experts were also involved in the work of the steering group, including two Orthodox, two Roman Catholics, two Lutherans and a Baptist (Thurian 1991:82).

The part of BEM dealing with baptism is divided into five sections:

- 1 The institution of baptism
- 2 The meaning of baptism
- 3 Baptism and faith
- 4 Baptismal practice
- 5 The celebration of baptism

10.4.3 The text of the BEM document A few comments will here be offered on the text in the light of the theme of this thesis,

'Baptism, Reconciliation and Unity', to see to what extent, in the writer's view, this text succeeds in bringing together the major traditions of Catholic, Reformed and Baptist.

The first section describes baptism as both a 'gift of God' and a 'rite of commitment to the Lord', founded in a dominical command and apostolic practice (BEM 1991:2). The expression 'gift of God' underlines the conviction of the divine initiative and action in baptism. The term 'rite of commitment' could be read by a Baptist as supporting the position that baptism is an act of faith and commitment. However the text does not spell out precisely whose commitment is in view here and this could be understood also as the commitment of the parents in bringing their children to baptism.

In the second section on the meaning of baptism the text emphasizes that which König, Walsh and Beasley-Murray all pointed out in their treatment of baptism, that baptism in the New Testament not only signifies certain blessings bestowed by God, but that it is and gives these blessings: participation in Christ's death and resurrection, cleansing from sin, the gift of the Holy Spirit, incorporation into the Body of Christ (BEM 1991:2). 'Through baptism, Christians are brought into union with Christ, with each other and with the Church of every time and place.' Many Baptists would feel uneasy about such a statement (along with some Paedobaptists) unless it could be made clear that the baptism being referred to is at one and the same time a rite of commitment to the Lord. This latter interpretation could be read into the sentence which follows the one quoted above: 'Our common baptism, which unites us to Christ in faith, is thus a basic bond of unity' (BEM 1991:3), 'in faith' being the key word here. However, it is impossible that the framers of the text intended that baptism should have this restricted meaning (personal commitment to Christ) as this would exclude infant baptism.

So the wording of the second section remains problematical. While scholars in all traditions (Baptist, Reformed, Catholic) might well agree that it accurately describes those baptisms described and referred to in the New Testament, many will question whether the *same meaning* can be applied to

baptisms today - whether they be the baptism of infants or the baptism of adults - unless those baptisms represent an actual turning to Christ in faith and repentance. It needs to be pointed out more clearly (perhaps in the official commentary accompanying the BEM text) that the same meaning cannot be ascribed to all baptisms without distinction, and that the meaning of any particular baptism is determined by the circumstances and function of that baptism in its context. The baptism of an infant born into a devout Christian home has a particular meaning; the baptism of an infant performed as a cultural custom has another meaning. The baptism of a teenager brought up in a Christian home has one meaning and the baptism of a Jew receiving the gospel of Christ has a somewhat different meaning. The meaning of baptism in the New Testament cannot be simply ascribed to contemporary instances of baptism unless those baptisms fulfil the same function and purpose as the New Testament baptisms.

The third section of the BEM document on baptism does much to allay any fears that the compilers of this statement were guilty of underplaying the role of faith in reception of salvation. Its key phrases are: 'Baptism is both God's gift and our human response to that gift. ... The necessity of faith for the reception of the salvation embodied and set forth in baptism is acknowledged by all churches. Personal commitment is necessary for responsible membership in the body of Christ' (BEM 1991:3). Some Catholic and Reformed people have felt uneasy with some of these phrases. In the case of the baptism of an infant, how is that baptism a 'human response' to the gift of God? Is not the gracious act of God here being diluted by an insistence on some human act of faith? (Report 1990:44). Of course the 'human response' and 'faith' referred to does not have to refer only to the response of the one being baptised. In Catholic theology in particular great emphasis has always been placed on the faith of the church, the community which brings its infants to God and to baptism in faith, believing that such acts are efficacious precisely because they are performed in faithful obedience to his commands. And the faith of the church which brings the infant to baptism becomes the faith of the child as the child develops the capacity to understand and articulate that faith. Otherwise the child becomes an apostate, just as would be the case of an adult baptised into Christ and afterwards abandoning the faith.

The fourth section of the BEM document on baptismal practice deals in a direct and forthright fashion with some of the differences and tensions in baptismal practice. When one considers the overwhelming predominance of paedobaptist scholars involved in the preparation of this document and the minimal Baptist involvement, a Baptist scholar can only be impressed by the fairness shown to the Baptist position in this section. Indeed, some Paedobaptists could object that their position is being discriminated against. The section begins with the following paragraph:

While the possibility that infant baptism was also practised in the apostolic age cannot be excluded, baptism upon personal profession of faith is the most clearly attested pattern in the New Testament documents (BEM 1991:4).

The document then goes on to say that in the course of history the practice of baptism has developed in a variety of forms, with some churches baptising believers and their children and other churches restricting baptism to those who are able to make a personal profession of faith. The document makes no attempt to judge between these various patterns of baptismal practice and clearly regards them both as legitimate. Many Paedobaptists, for sure, would prefer a stronger statement concerning the apostolic foundation of the practice of infant baptism, just as many Baptists would have reservations concerning even the possibility of the same (Report 1990:46). It is the conviction of this writer, in a study of the debate between Jeremias and Aland on this very subject (Roy 1987), that the opening paragraph of this section accurately sums up the historical evidence available to us, namely, that the practice of infant baptism in the apostolic age can neither be established or excluded in an absolute way beyond any reasonable doubt.

Notwithstanding the admirable attempts, however, of the compilers of this document to mediate constructively between two historically opposing positions there do remain certain problems. Christians of all traditions would agree that 'baptism is an unrepeatable act'. However the following statement: 'Any practice which might be interpreted as "re-baptism" must be avoided' (BEM 1991:4) does not adequately take into account the

predicament of the person who, on grounds of conscience, is not convinced that his or her baptism as an infant was a legitimate baptism, and sincerely desires to confess Christ in baptism (Report 1990:48). The writer has already argued in the previous chapter (Ways Towards Convergence) that in the interests of Christian reconciliation and unity Baptists need to be willing to grant some validity to infant baptism, when such is performed by believers in good conscience, and likewise Paedobaptists need to allow for the possibility on occasions for believers to request 're-baptism' when led in conscience to do so. Any attempt to exclude either infant baptism or rebaptism is not in the interests of Christian reconciliation and unity as it in effect excludes certain Christians who are acting in obedience to Christ's command as they understand it. This phrase in the BEM document (IV, 13) goes against the general spirit of the document which strongly favours mutual respect and conciliation between differing traditions. In deference to the compilers of the text it could be mentioned that their use of the word 'avoided' rather than 'rejected' or 'condemned' could possibly be interpreted by the Baptist as an acknowledgement that in some cases rebaptism could be allowed, but that in order not to give offence to other churches it should be avoided as far as possible.

Yet another questionable phrase in this fourth section is the sentence: 'Baptism should, therefore, always be celebrated and developed in the setting of the Christian community' (BEM 1991:4). While this is not a point of controversy, as far as this writer is aware, between any of the major Christian traditions, yet surely it is an unnecessary restriction, especially in the light of the pattern of baptisms recorded in the book of Acts where baptisms were always administered immediately, irrespective of time or place, to those desiring to become Christians, whether individuals, families or larger groups. In fact it can be questioned if there is a single instance in the New Testament where a baptism is recorded as having taken place in the context of the regular gathering together of the church for divine worship.

The BEM document is accompanied by a brief commentary on the basic text, and before leaving this fourth section, attention can be drawn to an

admirable attempt in this commentary to mediate in a conciliatory way between the infant-baptist and believer-baptist traditions:

In some churches which unite both infant-baptist and believer-baptist traditions, it has been possible to regard as equivalent alternatives for entry into the Church both a pattern whereby baptism in infancy is followed by later profession of faith and a pattern whereby believers' baptism follows upon a presentation and blessing in infancy. This example invites other churches to decide whether they, too, could not recognize equivalent alternatives in their reciprocal relationships and in church union negotiations (BEM 1991:5).

The spirit displayed in the above comment shows that the compilers of the BEM document were scholars truly committed to seeking reconciliation and unity between the differing baptismal practises in various churches.

In the fifth and final section of the BEM document (The Celebration of Baptism) attention is drawn to certain aspects of the different traditions with a view to encouraging mutual enrichment in the various rites connected with the celebration of baptism. Thus, for example, perhaps Baptists are in mind when the text declares: 'In the celebration of baptism the symbolic dimension of water should be taken seriously and not minimalized. The act of immersion can vividly express the reality that in baptism the Christian participates in the death, burial and resurrection of Christ.' And perhaps Eastern Orthodox practice is in mind in the following statement: 'As was the case in the early centuries, the gift of the Spirit in baptism may be signified in additional ways; for example, by the sign of the laying on of hands, and by anointing or chrismation' (BEM 1991:6).

10.4.4 Responses of the Churches to the BEM document So extensive have been the responses of the Churches to the BEM document (186 official responses by 1990) that books have been published and are being published to record and publicize them. Here only some broad outlines will be surveyed in order to get some idea of how various traditions have responded to this text.

In general a very positive response has come from churches of all traditions and from all parts of the world. The Roman Catholic response affirms that 'BEM is perhaps the most significant result of the (Faith and Order) movement so far' (Report 1990:18). The Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople greeted the Lima document 'with joy as the fruit of the efforts made during recent decades by the Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches.' From the Episcopal Church, USA, came the statement: 'We rejoice in the convergence of belief which this document represents and we regard it as a major step which the World Council of Churches has sponsored in the work of healing and reconciliation.' The Synod of the Reformed Church in Hungary welcomed the Lima document as follows: 'We are convinced that the Lima document is the best considered and elaborated paper in the whole history of the ecumenical movement in the service of the unity of the church as to these often discussed questions of decisive importance' (Report 1990:18).

The above are just a few of the comments coming from churches in the paedobaptist tradition. But there have also been positive comments from churches in the credobaptist tradition. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) could state: 'Because of the unity already represented in BEM and the ways in which differing theological positions are stated, Disciples join other Christians in appreciation for the significance of this document.' The American Baptist Churches in the USA responded: 'We give thanks to God for the "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry" document - for the co-operation and the dialogue among Christians that made it possible, for the extensive biblical study and the insights which are represented in it, for the way in which many historical confusions and divisions among Christians are addressed in it.' In the same spirit the Burma Baptist Convention responded with a 'spirit of thanksgiving. We are grateful to God for the advent of BEM. Surely it is not by might nor human power that this historic "ecumenical milestone" has been reached. We express our thanks to all who have committed themselves to this unforgettable ecumenical task and laboured to bring this document into being.' The Baptist Union of Great Britain welcomed BEM as 'a notable milestone in the search for sufficient theological consensus to make possible mutual recognition among separated churches.' Even the Seventh Day Adventists

(definitely not members of the WCC) have referred positively to BEM as 'unquestionably one of the World Council of Churches' most significant publications to date' (Report 1990:19-21).

Of course there have also been some critical comments on the BEM document, and it is instructive to take note of some of them. Eastern Orthodox responses have contained critical comments which can be summarized by the finding of the Finnish Orthodox Church that 'some parts of the document include theological terminology, categories and problematics of the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches of the West. In most cases the way the common faith of the undivided church is expressed is strange for us.' On the other hand, a number of Reformation and Free churches have spoken of a too 'catholic' or 'high church' orientation of BEM. Among this group of critical comments the strongest ones came from the Waldensian and Methodist Churches in Italy. Their synod pointed out that BEM 'indicates a convergence in a sacramental and clerical direction which is opposite to the direction in which the gospel calls the church in its witness in the world' and that 'this ecumenical document centres the faith, communion and Christian witness not on God and the gospel, but rather on the church as a structure that has and gives guarantees of the Spirit's activities through a caste endowed with priestly powers, mediatorial, and representing the divine' (Report 1990:30).

It is inevitable that a document that seeks to promote reconciliation and unity between the various Christian traditions will be seen as having certain weaknesses by elements on different sides. Many more detailed criticisms of specific clauses in the text of the document could be mentioned. However these critical comments must not be allowed to obscure what is undoubtedly an overall positive appreciation of the BEM document by the broad spectrum of Christian churches in the world. 'We recognize in the document "the faith of the church throughout the ages"' commented the Baptist Union of Denmark 'though we find this expression more a description of the creative power of the ecclesiastical tradition than the norm of confession which alone can be found in the canonical scriptures.' The text on baptism was found by the Roman Catholic Church to be 'grounded in the apostolic faith received and professed by the Catholic Church.' The

Reformed Churches in the Netherlands also recognized in the section on baptism 'fundamental elements of the church's faith through the ages ...' (Report 1990: 33-34).

10.5 Concluding comments There is certainly a vast difference in ethos and theological understanding between the BEM document and the Church of North India on the one hand (both products of the ecumenical movement) and the faith and practice of the individual Cape Peninsular congregations studied in 10.2 on the other hand. Common to all the latter is a strongly evangelical understanding of the faith. Even where infant baptism is practised (or tolerated, as the case may be) it is within the context of an evangelical understanding of the sacrament. A catholic, sacramental approach to baptism has no real place in any of these churches. This is perhaps why these churches have a tendency to gravitate towards a credobaptist position, a position possibly more consistent with the prevailing evangelical ethos characterising these churches. The BEM document, on the other hand, has quite strongly catholic and sacramental overtones, to the extent that many evangelicals, whether credobaptist or paedobaptist, would consider it too 'high church' in its tone. So the fact that Christians and churches might be sympathetic to both believers' baptism and infant baptism does not necessarily mean they have spanned the spectrum of baptismal views. The difference between Christians holding to baptism as a sign, or symbol of grace and those who see baptism as a means whereby grace is actually mediated is probably greater than the difference between those who accept and those who reject infant baptism.

There do remain, therefore, very real gaps between Christians in their understanding and practice of baptism, despite the fact that some congregations would seem to have developed a very inclusive policy on baptism. Nevertheless, the positive gains that have been made must not be ignored. It is striking that it is generally churches of a Protestant evangelical kind that have often made most practical progress in bridging quite different baptismal traditions, though their theological understanding of the issues has often been unsophisticated. The BEM document, however, must not be seen only in terms of its 'high' doctrine of baptism. The framers of that document made real efforts to incorporate

into it an emphasis on the importance of repentance, faith and personal commitment, so important to those of evangelical convictions. It is the conviction of the writer that careful study of the BEM document could do much to promote a deeper understanding and appreciation of the different baptismal traditions present in some of the churches studied above. Indeed, churches seeking to consciously create a fellowship that would include believers having differing baptismal convictions would do well to incorporate the BEM document into their constitutions; if not as a dogmatic confession then at least as a basis for dialogue, discussion and mutual understanding.

The BEM document has sometimes been criticized as a compromise document, trying to include bits and pieces from various baptismal traditions in an attempt to please as many as possible. It may be suggested, at the conclusion of this chapter, that that is not necessarily a bad thing, and that compromise documents can play a valuable role in bringing alienated parties into closer contact and dialogue. Consider, for example, the pivotal role played by Chalcedon in the year 451 in bringing to some kind of conclusion the Christological struggles and strife of the fourth and fifth centuries. The formula of the Chalcedonian decree was not an original and new creation but rather like a mosaic, 'assembled almost entirely from stones that were already available' (Pelikan 1971:264). The two antagonistic theological schools that it sought to reconcile were those of Alexandria and Antioch and the document was made up of excerpts from Cyril (Alexandrian), Theodoret (Antiochene) and Leo (Roman). Key phrases that were held dear to the different schools of thought were all included. So, for example, the expressions *θεοτοκος* (dear to the Alexandrians) and 'two natures' (dear to the Antiochenes) were all included in the formula. Some found the compromise nature of the statement unacceptable, and the Nestorians and Monophysites have remained unreconciled to Chalcedon to this day. But many others accepted Chalcedon, though it might have been, in the words of Pelikan, 'an agreement to disagree' (1971:266), and it has continued to function as a symbol of unity for the vast majority of Christian churches to this day.

Perhaps the BEM document today can be viewed in a similar way. If it cannot command the unqualified support of every church as a completely adequate statement of the doctrine of baptism, then at least it can be seen as an 'agreement to disagree', but then to disagree in a spirit of Christian love and respect, all the while remaining in dialogue and fellowship with one another. The prevailing tone of the BEM document is strongly sacramental and therefore more easily acceptable to those of 'high church' sympathies, whether Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran, Reformed or other. Credobaptists, generally speaking, do not feel comfortable with the sacramental way of speaking that is characteristic of BEM. They cannot help but ask themselves: 'Should not all these blessings being attributed to baptism - the washing away of sin, a new birth, renewal by the Spirit, incorporation into Christ - more properly be attributed to faith and repentance?' But that interpretation is perfectly possible for the Credobaptist. Credobaptists are perfectly free to interpret every reference to baptism in BEM as the sacramental actualization of repentance towards God and faith in Jesus Christ. There is nothing in the document that precludes such an interpretation, although it is obvious that not everyone will interpret it in such a way. Indeed, Credobaptists could even appeal to certain sections of BEM in support of their interpretation, such as section 8:

Baptism is both God's gift and our human response to that gift. It looks towards a growth into the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:13). The necessity of faith for the reception of the salvation embodied and set forth in baptism is acknowledged by all churches. Personal commitment is necessary for responsible membership in the body of Christ (BEM 1991:3).

In addition, Baptists could refer to section 11 of BEM where it states: 'While the possibility that infant baptism was also practised in the apostolic age cannot be excluded, baptism upon personal profession of faith is the most clearly attested pattern in the New Testament documents' (BEM 1991:4). Catholics, of course, could immediately answer that BEM clearly accepts the validity of infant baptism and so every spiritual blessing attributed to baptism in BEM must also be attributed to infant

baptism, as the document makes no attempt to exclude infants from the blessings of salvation given by God in and through baptism. But it is these contradictory and conflicting possibilities of interpretation that makes BEM something of a compromise document, a document that can play a valuable role in bringing into dialogue and creative tension two conflicting approaches to baptism.

CHAPTER 11

ANALYSIS OF EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

11.1 Introduction

For the purpose of this chapter, a questionnaire was submitted to students studying theology at five different theological institutions in South Africa: the Dutch Reformed Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria, the Baptist Theological College (BTC) in Cape Town, St Joseph's Theological Institute at Cedara (Pietermaritzburg), the Cape Evangelical Bible Institute (CEBI) in Cape Town, and the Bible Institute (BI) at Kalk Bay. A copy of the questionnaire may be found on the last page of this chapter.

A total of 182 responses to the questionnaire were received from students representing at least twenty different denominations in South Africa. At first the intention was to analyse the responses according to denominational affiliation, but after studying the responses, it became clear that each institution has a particular ethos of its own, exercising a certain influence on its students, whatever their ecclesiastical affiliation. So it was decided to analyse the results of the questionnaire according to each institution, and then, at the end of the chapter, to conclude with some observations concerning the responses as a whole.

The institutions differed considerably from one another. Some were more ecclesiastically 'homogeneous', such as the Dutch Reformed students at Pretoria and the Baptist students at BTC. St Joseph's students were predominantly Roman Catholic, with a sprinkling of other churches represented. CEBI and BI included a wide variety of (Protestant) churches among their students who responded to the questionnaire.

Question 1 of the questionnaire required respondents to identify their church as one in which 'the infants of believers are normally baptised' or not. Consequently all the churches represented by the respondents are

divided into two major groups which will be referred to as 'paedobaptist' or 'credobaptist'. The inadequacy of some of this terminology is fully acknowledged, as discussed in the introductory chapter of this thesis (1.3.3), but will nevertheless be used in the absence of any generally accepted alternatives. Of the 182 respondents 112 were from paedobaptist churches, 69 were from credobaptist churches and one was apparently unsure how to answer this question stating 'both occur at our church'. According to this basic twofold division, all the respondents from Pretoria University were paedobaptist, all the respondents from BTC in Cape Town were credobaptist, all the respondents from St Joseph's (with the exception of one) were paedobaptist and the students from CEBI and BI were pretty evenly divided between paedobaptist and credobaptist.

The questionnaire was divided into three sections. Respondents from churches in which infants baptism is practised were required to answer section A (questions 2-3) and section C (questions 7-9). Respondents from churches which do not (normally) practise infant baptism were required to answer section B (questions 4-6) and section C

11.2 Dutch Reformed theological students in Pretoria The following responses were obtained from a group of Dutch Reformed students studying theology at the University of Pretoria. There were fifty respondents, all of them male with the exception of one female. Average age: 26.

QUESTION 2: Should parents be allowed by the church to delay the baptism of their children if they so wish, until such time as the children themselves are able to profess their faith?

YES	***** 38%
UNDER CERTAIN CIRCUMSTANCES	***** 12%
UNSURE	* 2%
NO	***** 36%

Those who answered UNDER CERTAIN CIRCUMSTANCES elaborated as follows:

if valid reasons can be given for such a decision
if there is doubt about the faith and life of the parents;
if parents lack assurance of salvation (geloofsekerheid)
if that is the personal choice of the parents;
if counselling is given to such parents to help them understand infant baptism;
if the parents promise to bring up their children in the faith.

QUESTION 3: Should those who received baptism as infants be permitted by the church to be baptised later as believers if they so desire?

YES	***** 16%
UNDER CERTAIN CIRCUMSTANCES	0%
UNSURE	* 2%
NO	***** 82%

QUESTION 7: Do you think it is possible for Christians having differing baptismal convictions to be accommodated within one congregation?

YES	***** 66%
UNSURE	***** 12%
NO	***** 18%
NO RESPONSE	** 4%

QUESTION 8: Should a pastor be free to administer or to refrain from administering certain kinds of baptism (eg infant baptism, rebaptism)?

YES	***** 38%
UNSURE	**** 8%
NO	***** 50%
NO RESPONSE	** 4%

QUESTION 9: Should the administration of baptism be restricted to ordained ministers?

YES	***** 56%
IN MOST CASES	***** 14%
UNSURE	**** 8%
NO	***** 16%
NO RESPONSE	*** 6%

Comments

- 1 The above responses indicate an overwhelming rejection of any idea of rebaptism (82%). Only 16% of the respondents were in favour of of such a step being permitted by the church, that those who had already been baptised as infants should be allowed to request baptism again as believers at a later stage.
- 2 A surprising number (38%) of the respondents were in favour of parents being allowed by the church to delay the baptism of their children, if they so wish, until such time as the children themselves are able to profess their faith. A further 24% indicated they could approve such a policy under certain circumstances (summarized above), making a total of 62% who were open to such a policy.
- 3 A strong majority of the respondents (66%) felt that it was possible for Christians having differing baptismal convictions to be accommodated within one congregation. Only 18% saw no possibility of this. This response indicates a strong desire for the realisation of greater unity among Christians, notwithstanding the reality of differing convictions, even in so sensitive an area as baptism.
- 4 50% of the respondents did not feel that a pastor should be free to either administer or refrain from administering certain kinds of baptism. Only 38% of the respondents were in agreement with such freedom being granted to the pastor.

- 5 A clear majority of the respondents (56%) were in favour of restricting the administration of baptism to ordained ministers. This response was quite different to the responses from the students of other theological institutions where only a minority felt the administration of baptism should be restricted to ordained ministers (BI 20%, CEBI 21%, St Joseph's 13%, BTC 3%).

We can summarize those points of the above responses that are of special interest to the central theme of this thesis as follows: The great majority of the Dutch Reformed theological students at Pretoria University who responded to the questionnaire believe that some kind of accommodation for Christians having differing baptismal convictions is possible in the interests of promoting Christian unity, and would be in favour of parents being permitted to delay the baptism of their children, if they so wish. But they are definitely opposed to the rebaptism of those already baptised in infancy and would not want such a practice to be sanctioned by the church.

11.3 Baptist students in Cape Town The following responses were obtained from a group of Baptist students studying theology at the Baptist Theological College at Cape Town, an official training institution of the Baptist Union of Southern Africa. Total number of respondents: 35, 31 male and 4 female. Average age: 29.

QUESTION 4: Would you be willing to accept the baptism of an infant as a valid baptism, even if you have reservations about its correctness and desirability?

YES	***** 23%
UNCERTAIN	***** 20%
NO	***** 57%

QUESTION 5: Should parents be permitted by the church to have their infant children baptised if they so wish?

YES	***** 37%
UNCERTAIN	* 3%
NO	***** 60%

Of those who responded YES half were willing for such infant baptisms to be administered in the local church while the other half thought they should be administered in another church where infant baptism is practised.

QUESTION 6: Should it be possible for those only baptised as infants to become full members of the church?

YES	***** 37%
NO	***** 57%
NO RESPONSE	** 6%

QUESTION 7: Do you think it is possible for Christians having differing baptismal convictions to be accommodated within one congregation?

YES	***** 66%
UNSURE	***** 14%
NO	***** 20%

QUESTION 8: Should a pastor be free to administer, or to refrain from administering, certain kinds of baptism (eg infant baptism, rebaptism)?

YES	***** 54%
UNSURE	***** 17%
NO	***** 29%

QUESTION 9: Should ordinary believers be permitted by the church to administer baptism?

YES	***** 63%
UNSURE	** 6%
SOMETIMES	***** 29%
NO	* 3%

Those respondents who answered SOMETIMES to the last question above elaborated their responses as follows:

if the believer is a mature Christian;
in the absence of a pastor;
in a missionary situation where no minister/leader is available;
if the baptiser is a father, youth leader, or one who led the candidate to Christ, and only with the permission of the pastor;
in the church only.

Comments

- 1 A slight but consistent majority of the respondents saw no room in the church for infant baptism in any form. 57% could not grant any validity at all to infant baptisms. 60% were opposed to parents being allowed by the church to baptise their infants if they so wished, and 57% were opposed to the acceptance into full membership of the church of those who had only been baptised as infants (without being baptised as conscious believers).
- 2 Yet a strong majority of the respondents (66%) believed that it was possible for Christians having differing baptismal convictions to be accommodated within one congregation. One cannot help being struck by what seems to be a strange inconsistency here. How can different baptismal convictions be accommodated in one congregation when any recognition or practice of infant baptism is ruled out of court? Yet this is clearly the position taken by many, it would seem, of the respondents.

- 3 Concerning the freedom of a pastor to act according to his or her conscience in the administration or non administration of baptism, a slight majority (54%) were in favour of such freedom.
- 4 This group was the first group to respond to the questionnaire and the question on 'lay baptism' ('Should ordinary believers be permitted by the church to administer baptism?') was subsequently changed to 'Should the administration of baptism be restricted to ordained ministers?' The comment was made that all believers are ordinary believers. However, in the form the Baptist students responded to this question, the great majority (63%) were in favour of such 'lay baptisms', with only a small minority (3%) opposed.
- 5 To return to the attitude of these Baptist students to infant baptisms, although the majority could not grant any validity to them, 23% were able to grant some validity to them with a further 20% uncertain how to respond. This means there were 43% of the respondents who had not completely ruled out the possibility of granting some kind of recognition to infant baptisms - although such recognition could not be interpreted as approval. Furthermore, it can be noted that 37% of the respondents were in favour of accepting into full church membership those who had not been baptised as believers but only as infants. Even more striking is that the same percentage (37%) were in favour of parents being permitted by the church to have their infants baptised if they so wished, although only 20% felt that such infant baptisms could be performed in the local (Baptist) church.

The responses of the Baptist students at Cape Town can be summarized as follows: while a clear majority (57-60%) of the respondents saw no room for any recognition or practice of infant baptism in the church, a strong majority (66%) thought it possible for Christians having differing baptismal convictions to be accommodated within one congregation and a significant minority were in favour of granting some recognition to infant baptism and even allowing its practice in the church.

11.4 Catholic students at St Joseph's Theological Institute at Cedara (Pietermaritzburg) While St Joseph's is a Roman Catholic institution and the majority of the students are Catholic, some of the students there are from other churches. Of the 38 respondents to the questionnaire, 23 were Roman Catholic, 6 were Methodist, 5 Anglican, 2 Lutheran, 1 Congregationalist, and 1 Baptist. Exactly half (19) of the students were female and the average age was 42. The respondents from St Joseph's were different to the respondents from the other institutions with respect to the significantly older average age and the higher proportion of female respondents. To facilitate analysis the one Baptist respondent will be ignored so that the remaining respondents can be divided into two main groups, Roman Catholics and non Roman Catholics, both groups practising infant baptism.

The responses of these students will be divided into three categories: firstly, that of the Roman Catholic respondents (RC), secondly, that of the respondents from other paedobaptist churches (OP), and thirdly, that of all the respondents together (ALL). In answer to the QUESTION 2 below, for example, 30% of the Roman Catholic respondents answered YES, 86% of the respondents from other paedobaptist churches answered YES, and of all the respondents taken together 51% answered YES.

QUESTION 2: Should parents be allowed by the church to delay the baptism of their children, if they so wish, until such time as the children themselves are able to profess their faith?

YES	*****RC 30%	*****OP 86%	ALL 51%
UNDER CERTAIN CIRCUMSTANCES	*****RC 22%		ALL 14%
UNSURE	*RC 4%	*OP 7%	ALL 5%
NO	*****RC 43%	*OP 7%	ALL 30%

Those who answered UNDER CERTAIN CIRCUMSTANCES elaborated as follows:
 if that is the conviction of the parents;
 if the parents can offer no spiritual support to their children;

if the parents are not baptised;
 if the parents are not committed, practising Catholics.

QUESTION 3: Should those who received baptism as infants be permitted by the church to be baptised later as believers if they so desire?

YES	**RC 9%	****OP 30%	ALL 16%
UNDER CERTAIN CIRCUMSTANCES	**RC 9%	***OP 21%	ALL 14%
UNSURE		*OP 7%	ALL 3%
NO	*****RC 83%	*****OP 43%	ALL 68%

Those who answered UNDER CERTAIN CIRCUMSTANCES elaborated as follows:

if they doubted the grace of infant baptism;
 they might have wished to belong to another denomination;
 if they felt their infant baptism was not valid (parents not committed);
 if their family has had no lasting church membership.

QUESTION 7: Do you think it is possible for Christians having differing baptismal convictions to be accommodated within one congregation?

YES	*****RC 57%	*****OP 93%	ALL 70%
UNSURE	*****RC 26%	*OP 7%	ALL 19%
NO	**RC 9%		ALL 5%
NO RESPONSE	**RC 9%		ALL 5%

QUESTION 8: Should a pastor be free to administer or to refrain from administering certain kinds of baptism (eg infant baptism, rebaptism)?

YES	*****RC 39%	*****OP 57%	ALL 46%
UNSURE	*RC 4%		ALL 3%
NO	*****RC 43%	*****OP 43%	ALL 43%
NO RESPONSE	***RC 13%		ALL 8%

QUESTION 9: Should the administration of baptism be restricted to ordained ministers?

YES	**RC 9%	***OP 21%	ALL 14%
IN MOST CASES	*****RC 39%	***OP 21%	ALL 32%
UNSURE			
NO	*****RC 39%	*****OP 57%	ALL 46%
NO RESPONSE	***RC 13%		ALL 8%

Comments The Roman Catholic respondents will first be considered as a group, then the respondents from other denominations, then the whole group together.

Roman Catholics

- 1 As with the Dutch Reformed respondents from Pretoria, the Roman Catholic respondents indicated a very strong rejection (83%) of any idea of rebaptism.
- 2 Although 43% of the respondents were not in favour of parents being allowed by the church to delay the baptism of their children if they so desired, a surprising 30% were in favour of that option, and if we add the 22% who were willing to allow that option under certain circumstances we have a small majority (52%) who were in favour of that option being a possibility for parents.
- 3 A definite majority (57%) thought it possible for Christians having differing baptismal convictions to be accommodated within one congregation. A number were unsure and only 9% saw no possibility for such unity. As with the Cape Town Baptist students (although not to the same degree) one cannot help but notice a certain inconsistency here. If neither the possibility of rebaptism or the delay of the baptism of infants are to be permitted by the church, how can Christians of differing baptismal convictions be accommodated in the same congregation?

The other paedobaptist respondents

- 1 There is a marked difference between these responses and those of the Roman Catholic respondents. The overwhelming majority (86%) were in favour of parents being given the option to delay the baptism of their children if they so wished and virtually all these respondents thought it possible for Christians having differing baptismal convictions to be accommodated within one congregation.
- 2 30% of these respondents were in favour of the church permitting those who had been baptised as infants to be baptised as believers if they so desired, with a further 21% in favour of such an option under certain circumstances, making a total of 51% who could be said to be in favour of such an option being possible, under certain circumstances.
- 3 Although the total number of non Roman Catholic respondents at St Joseph's was small, the pattern of response was very similar to that shown by other non-Catholic paedobaptist respondents in two other institutions covered in this study (the Cape Evangelical Bible Institute and the Bible Institute at Kalk Bay) as will be seen below.

Summary

Taking all the respondents from St Joseph's Theological Institute together the results of the questionnaire can be summarized as follows: a strong majority think it possible for differing baptismal convictions to be accommodated together in one congregation but are opposed to the option of rebaptism being permitted by the church. A smaller majority favour the church permitting parents to delay the baptism of their children if they so wish. Respondents from the non-Catholic paedobaptist churches generally showed more flexibility in wanting to allow greater freedom of individual conscience than the Roman Catholic respondents.

11.5 Theological students at the Cape Evangelical Bible Institute (CEBI) in Cape Town Unlike the other institutions considered so far, CEBI is not attached to any particular denomination and does not function as an official training institution for

any church. As a result its students represent a wide range of ecclesiastical affiliation. Respondents to the questionnaire indicated membership in the following churches/denominations: Congregationalist, Church of the Province, Community Bible Fellowship, Evangelical Endeavour Mission Church, Full Gospel, Presbyterian, Cape Town City Mission, Church of England in SA, Methodist, Lutheran, Jubilee Community Church, International Fellowship of Christian Churches, Baptist, Dutch Reformed, Assemblies of God. In addition to the aforementioned fifteen denominations, three respondents simply wrote 'Pentecostal', which could mean a number of denominations, and four respondents gave no indication of the church they belonged to. It could be said of CEBI that it is truly representative of South African Christianity with its very wide diversity of ecclesiastical denominations. Of the 29 respondents, 21 were male and 8 were female. Average age: 30.

The respondents from CEBI can be broadly divided into two groups, those in whose churches the infants of believers are normally baptised (who will be referred to as paedobaptist [PB]) and those in whose churches the infants of believers are not normally baptised (who will be referred to as credobaptist [CB]). Of the 29 respondents, 13 were from paedobaptist churches and 16 from credobaptist churches.

QUESTION 2 (to paedobaptists only): Should parents be allowed by the church to delay the baptism of their children, if they so wish, until such time as the children themselves are able to profess their faith?

YES	***** 85%
UNDER CERTAIN CIRCUMSTANCES	
UNSURE	** 15%
NO	

QUESTION 3 (to paedobaptists only): Should those who received baptism as infants be permitted by the church to be baptised later as believers if they so desire?

YES	***** 92%
UNDER CERTAIN CIRCUMSTANCES	
UNSURE	
NO	* 8%

QUESTION 4 (to credobaptists only): Would you be willing to accept the baptism of an infant as a valid baptism even if you have reservations about its correctness and desirability?

YES	***** 44%
UNDER CERTAIN CIRCUMSTANCES	** 12%
UNCERTAIN	* 6%
NO	***** 38%

QUESTION 5 (to credobaptists only): Should parents be permitted by the church to have their infant children baptised if they so wish?

YES	***** 38%
UNCERTAIN	* 6%
NO	***** 50%
NO RESPONSE	* 6%

QUESTION 6 (to credobaptists only): Should it be possible for those baptised as infants only to become full members of the church?

YES	*** 19%
NO	***** 75%
NO RESPONSE	* 6%

QUESTION 7 (to all): Do you think it is possible for Christians having differing baptismal convictions to be accommodated within one congregation?

YES	*****PB 69%	*****CB 63%	ALL 66%
UNSURE	****PB 31%	**CB 12%	ALL 21%
NO		***CB 19%	ALL 10%
NO RESPONSE		*CB 6%	ALL 3%

QUESTION 8 (to all): Should a pastor be free to administer or to refrain from administering certain kinds of baptism (eg infant baptism, rebaptism)?

YES	*****PB 85%	*****CB 38%	ALL 59%
UNSURE		****CB 25%	ALL 14%
NO	*PB 8%	*****CB 31%	ALL 21%
NO RESPONSE	*PB 8%	*CB 6%	ALL 7 %

QUESTION 9 (to all): Should the administration of baptism be restricted to ordained ministers?

YES	*****PB 38%	*CB 6%	ALL 21%
IN MOST CASES	**PB 15%	****CB 25%	ALL 21%
UNSURE			
NO	*****PB 38%	*****CB 69%	ALL 55%
NO RESPONSE	*PB 8%		ALL 3%

Comments

- 1 Paedobaptist respondents at CEBI indicated a high degree of flexibility in wanting to allow maximum freedom of conscience for individual believers in baptismal matters. 85% were in favour of parents being allowed by the church to delay the baptism of their infants if they so wished, 93% were in favour of those who had been baptised as infants

being permitted by the church to be baptised later as believers if they so desired, 69% thought it possible for differing baptismal convictions to be accommodated in one congregation, and 85% favoured maximum pastoral freedom in the administration or non administration of baptism.

- 2 Credobaptist respondents were not quite so flexible in granting recognition to infant baptism, although in response to the question whether they would be willing to grant some kind of (limited) validity to infant baptism, 44% answered YES as opposed to 38% who answered NO. Half these respondents were not in favour of parents being permitted by the church to have their infants baptised if they so wished, and a large majority of 75% were not in favour of church membership being granted to those baptised as infants only.
- 3 A clear majority of both credobaptist and paedobaptist groups thought it possible for differing baptismal convictions to be accommodated in one congregation. Again, one cannot but help note the inconsistency between this response and the 75% of credobaptists who were not in favour of church membership for paedobaptists.

11.6 Theological students at Bible Institute (BI), Kalk Bay Like CEBI, BI is an interdenominational institution, although it is closely related to the recently established George Whitefield College, the official training institution of the Church of England in SA. Also like CEBI, it's students come from a wide variety of churches. Respondents indicated their membership in the following churches/denominations: Baptist, Church of England in SA, Presbyterian, Brethren, Lutheran, Full Gospel, Dutch Reformed, El-Shaddai Ministries, Holy Overseers Church of SA, Revivals of God, Non-denominational.

Of 30 respondents 18 were male and 12 female. Average age: 26.

As with CEBI, we shall divide the respondents into two main groups, those belonging to paedobaptist churches (12) and those belonging to credobaptist churches (17). One respondent answered both YES and NO to the

question 'Are the infants of believers normally baptised in your church?' explaining in a note: 'Both occur at our church, therefore all three sections answered.'

QUESTION 2 (to paedobaptists only): Should parents be allowed by the church to delay the baptism of their children, if they so wish, until such time as the children themselves are able to profess their faith?

YES	***** 62%
UNDER CERTAIN CIRCUMSTANCES	* 8%
UNSURE	* 8%
NO	*** 23%

QUESTION 3 (to paedobaptists only): Should those who received baptism as infants be permitted by the church to be baptised later as believers if they so desire?

YES	*** 23%
UNDER CERTAIN CIRCUMSTANCES	** 15%
UNSURE	* 8%
NO	***** 54%

QUESTION 4 (to credobaptists only): Would you be willing to accept the baptism of an infant as a valid baptism, even if you have reservations about its correctness and desirability?

YES	***** 28%
UNDER CERTAIN CIRCUMSTANCES	**** 22%
UNCERTAIN	* 6%
NO	***** 44%

QUESTION 5 (to credobaptists only): Should parents be permitted by the church to have their infant children baptised if they so wish?

YES	***** 39%
UNCERTAIN	*** 17%
NO	***** 44%

QUESTION 6 (to credobaptists only): Should it be possible for those baptised as infants only to become full members of the church?

YES	***** 61%
NO	***** 39%

QUESTION 7 (to all): Do you think it is possible for Christians having differing baptismal convictions to be accommodated within one congregation?

YES	*****PB 77%	*****CB 72%	ALL 73%
UNSURE	**PB 15%	****CB 22%	ALL 22%
NO	*PB 8%		ALL 3%
NO RESPONSE		*CB 6%	ALL 3%

QUESTION 8 (to all): Should a pastor be free to administer or to refrain from administering certain kinds of baptism (eg infant baptism, rebaptism)?

YES	*****PB 85%	*****CB 39%	ALL 57%
UNSURE	*PB 8%	*****CB 28%	ALL 20%
NO	*PB 8%	*****CB 33%	ALL 23%

QUESTION 9 (to all): Should the administration of baptism be restricted to ordained ministers?

YES	****PB 31%	**CB 11%	ALL 20%
IN MOST CASES	*****PB 38%	*****CB 39%	ALL 37%
UNSURE		**CB 11%	ALL 7%
NO	****PB 31%	*****CB 39%	ALL 37%

Comments

- 1 As at CEBI the paedobaptist respondents showed a considerable degree of flexibility in wanting to allow believers maximum freedom of choice in matters baptismal - although not to the same degree as those at CEBI. 77% of them thought differing baptismal convictions could be accommodated in one congregation, 85% were in favour of pastoral freedom in the administration of baptism, 62% thought parents should be allowed by the church to delay the baptism of their children if they so wished. But when it came to the rebaptism of those already baptised as infants, a clear majority (54%) did not favour such an option being permitted by the church.
- 2 Respondents from the credobaptist group of churches also showed a certain degree of flexibility, less than that of the paedobaptist respondents but more than that of the Baptist student respondents in 10.3 above. 72% of these respondents thought it possible for Christians with different baptismal convictions to be accommodated within one congregation, and 61% were in favour of those baptised only as infants being accepted into church membership. Although only 28% indicated they could accept infant baptism as having some kind of validity, another 22% indicated that under certain circumstances they could grant some kind of validity to infant baptism, making a (tentative) total of 50%. Only 44% rejected it outright. And with respect to the possibility of the church permitting parents to have their infants baptised if they so wished, a surprising 39% were in favour, although 44% against.

11.7 Overall summary and conclusions We are now in a position to make some observations about all the respondents and their feelings and convictions concerning the administration of baptism, bearing in mind that in the questionnaire the respondents were requested to 'answer the questions according to your personal feelings and convictions, whether your responses reflect the official policy of your church or not.'

There were a total of 182 respondents, 69 of them belonging to credobaptist churches, 112 of them belonging to paedobaptist churches, and one who seemed uncertain as to whether the infants of believers were normally baptised in his church or not. A strong majority of both groups (69% of paedobaptists and 66% of credobaptists) thought it possible to accommodate differing baptismal convictions in one congregation. From this it can be inferred that the great majority of all the respondents were in favour of a unity that could transcend the baptismal differences that tend to divide Christians. Notwithstanding this desire for unity, however, it appears from some of the others responses that not all of the respondents had thought through what the implications of such a unity might be.

Of those in whose churches the baptism of infants was the norm, 50% agreed that parents should be allowed by the church to delay the baptism of their children if they so wished, and if we add those who agreed to this option being permitted under certain circumstances, the total percentage rises to 66%. An equally strong majority (65%), however, were not in favour of those who had been baptised as infants being permitted by the church to be baptised later as believers if they so desired.

Of those in whose churches infant baptism was not normally (or never) practised only 20% were willing to accept infant baptism as having some validity. If we add to this percentage those who were willing to accept infant baptism under certain circumstances and those who were uncertain, the total percentage rises to 50%. This indicates a significant number of baptist respondents who were at least open to the possibility of granting some recognition to infant baptism. Concerning official ecclesiastical sanction for parents to have their infant children baptised if they so wished, a clear majority (53%) were opposed to it and only 37% in favour.

Equally, a clear majority (57%) were opposed to church membership being open to those (only) baptised as infants.

About half of both groups were in favour of pastoral freedom in the administration or non administration of certain kinds of baptism, and with respect to the possibility of the 'lay' administration of baptism most of those in credobaptist churches were in favour while most of the paedobaptist respondents felt that in most cases, at least, the administration of baptism should be restricted to ordained ministers.

In summary we note that while the great majority of all the respondents desired a unity that would transcend baptismal differences, yet most of those belonging to credobaptist churches were reticent about granting any recognition of the validity of infant baptisms. As for the paedobaptist respondents, while they were sympathetic to the possibility of parents delaying the baptism of their children if they wished, they could not countenance any rebaptism of those baptised in infancy.

A few observations can also be made concerning the relative flexibility of the different ecclesiastical groups represented in the above study. Without doubt those respondents showing the greatest flexibility in their willingness to allow differing baptismal practices came from those 'mainline' paedobaptist churches *other than* the Dutch Reformed Church and the Roman Catholic Church. The least flexible respondents tended to be those from churches not practising infant baptism. Is it simply coincidence that this pattern tallies very closely with the relation those churches bear to the ecumenical movement and in particular to the best known instrument of the ecumenical movement in South Africa, the South African Council of Churches? Mainline paedobaptist churches (eg Anglicans, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Methodists, Congregationalists) are generally full members of the SACC. The Roman Catholic Church has observer member status (only since Vatican II) and the Dutch Reformed Church has only very recently applied for observer membership of the SACC - which has not yet been granted [Sept. 1994]. Baptists surveyed in this study, together with most other credobaptist churches are not connected in any way to the SACC.

Yet another tentative observation that can be made is that respondents from 'mixed' institutions, in which Christians from differing baptismal traditions mix freely with one another, tended to favour a more flexible policy concerning baptismal practices. Both these observations seem to point to the same conclusion: where Christians from different traditions have the opportunity to dialogue, fellowship and work together, an increase in mutual respect and acceptance invariably follows. This seems to be true whether the opportunity is provided by common membership in an ecumenical body such as the SACC, or whether by a more 'grass roots' kind of ecumenical experience such as an interdenominational Bible College. Indeed, the greatest degree of flexibility was undoubtedly shown by those respondents who belonged to SACC member churches and who studied at interdenominational schools (mainline paedobaptist students at CEBI and BI).

To which church or denomination do you belong? _____

Occupation _____ Gender _____ Age _____

- 1 Are the infants of believers normally baptised in your church? YES ☐ NO ☐
If YES, please answer the questions in block A (2-3) & block C (7-9)
if NO, please answer the questions in block B (4-6) & block C (7-9)

The following questions are all related to the administration of baptism in the local church. Please answer the questions according to your personal feelings and convictions, whether your responses reflect the official policy of your church or not.

- 2 Should parents be allowed by the church to delay the baptism of their children, if they so wish, until such time as the children themselves are able to profess their faith? YES ☐ UNSURE ☐ UNDER CERTAIN CIRCUMSTANCES ☐ NO ☐

If you answered UNDER CERTAIN CIRCUMSTANCES, please elaborate _____

- 3 Should those who received baptism as infants be permitted by the church to be baptised later as believers if they so desire? YES ☐ UNSURE ☐ UNDER CERTAIN CIRCUMSTANCES ☐ NO ☐

If you answered UNDER CERTAIN CIRCUMSTANCES, please elaborate _____

- 4 Would you be willing to accept the baptism of an infant as a valid baptism, even if you have reservations about its correctness and desirability? YES ☐ UNCERTAIN ☐ UNDER CERTAIN CIRCUMSTANCES ☐ NO ☐

- 5 Should parents be permitted by the church to have their infant children baptised if they so wish? YES ☐ UNCERTAIN ☐ NO ☐

If YES, should such baptisms take place in the local church? YES ☐ NO ☐
OR in another church where infant baptism is practised? YES ☐ NO ☐

- 6 Should it be possible for those baptised as infants only to become full members of the church? YES ☐ NO ☐

- 7 Do you think it is possible for Christians having differing baptismal convictions to be accommodated within one congregation? YES ☐ UNSURE ☐ NO ☐

- 8 Should a pastor be free to administer, or to refrain from administering, certain kinds of baptism (eg infant baptism, rebaptism)? YES ☐ UNSURE ☐ NO ☐

- 9 Should the administration of baptism be restricted to ordained ministers? YES ☐ IN MOST CASES ☐ UNSURE ☐ NO ☐

CHAPTER 12

A MODEL FOR RECONCILIATION

12.1 Introduction In answer to the question 'Do you think it is possible for Christians having differing baptismal convictions to be accommodated within one congregation?' the great majority (68%) of the 182 respondents considered in the previous chapter gave a positive reply. In fact, only 13% of the respondents thought it *not* possible. While there was no question asking whether such an accommodation was *desirable*, it is surely a reasonable inference that those who considered the accommodation of Christians having differing baptismal convictions in one congregation possible, would also consider such a prospect desirable.

This result points to the existence of a deep instinct among Christians that baptismal differences ought not to be divisive. Yet the responses studied in the previous chapter also showed that only a few were prepared to seriously consider the practical implications of such an accommodation. After living so many years in isolation from one another behind strongly entrenched positions, it is a costly and difficult thing for Christians to seriously consider making some kind of accommodation of positions traditionally rejected by their churches. In this chapter attention will be given to those kinds of costly decisions needed to bring about reconciliation and unity between Christians holding differing baptismal views.

Reconciliation between estranged persons or bodies is always a costly business. For this reason the cross is the primary symbol of the Christian faith, pointing to the sacrificial price paid by Christ to bring about the reconciliation of humans to God and one another. There are many parallels between reconciliation in the religious realm and reconciliation in the secular and social realm (hence the use by the New Testament of so many words drawn from the contemporary secular world to expound religious truths). In contemporary South Africa, where this thesis is being written, much attention is being given to the need of reconciliation between the

estranged communities and ethnic groups with the realisation of how difficult this is. In 1988 the National Initiative for Reconciliation produced a book entitled *The Cost of Reconciliation in South Africa* (Nürnberg & Tooke 1988) in which a number of Christian leaders in South Africa contributed articles grappling with the need and the way to promote genuine reconciliation in a deeply divided and suffering land. A constantly recurring theme in the articles is the pain and the difficulty of facing up to past patterns of injustice and the cost of taking effective action to end them. Exactly the same dynamics operate in the religious and ecclesiastical world. Centuries of prejudice and sub-Christian attitudes and actions have to be faced up to and decisive actions need to be taken to break down the dividing walls perpetuating theologically indefensible divisions within the body of Christ. There is simply no easy way of doing this, and progress will not be made without the willingness to give serious consideration to difficult and even 'impossible' actions.

The starting point for any consideration of proposed models is the obvious fact that the church already exists. It is a Protestant weakness to want to begin from scratch and create the church as it should be, and in the process create only a new schism and a new sect. It was originally intended to entitle this chapter 'A Suggested Model'. But that seemed too much like suggesting there is some kind of correct model which enlightened Christians could adopt as a solution to the differences of understanding which divide Christians today. However, fundamental to the thesis of this work is that there is no clear cut solution to the problems of baptismal differences between Christians and churches. There can only be a way of reconciliation which Christians and churches can pursue in order to seek solutions together in a spirit of mutual respect and love while resisting the temptation to allow their differences to divide them into opposing camps of antagonistic and hostile combatants. All references to a 'proposed model' in this chapter are simply references to this, a way of facilitating mutual dialogue and discussion in a non threatening environment characterised by mutual respect and Christian fellowship.

12.2 Freedom of conscience and the diaconal nature of baptism Foundational to any way of reconciliation is the recognition of the freedom of conscience granted to the Christian believer, and the willingness to implement this in practical ways. This freedom of conscience is deeply rooted in the Christian tradition and in the Scriptures - particularly in the writings of the apostle Paul, the 'apostle of the free Spirit' in the words of F F Bruce in his major work on Paul (1985). Bruce deliberately chose this phrase as the title of his book to emphasise the remarkable breadth of freedom for the Christian believer inherent in Paul's understanding of the gospel. Concerning this freedom Bruce elsewhere writes:

Christian freedom is subject only to the self-imposed constraint of Christian charity. No-one may dictate what Christians must do in indifferent matters such as food or the observation of special days; it is for them to restrict their freedom voluntarily if its exercise may harm the spiritual life of others. Plainly, true spiritual freedom will not lead Christians into courses of action which enslave them, nor can it encourage practices which are generally unhelpful and not conducive to the healthy upbuilding of the whole believing community (Bruce 1988:265).

Luther, too, in his liberating discovery of the essence of the Pauline gospel also had occasion to exult in *The Freedom of a Christian* as his well known tract on the subject was entitled. It was in that treatise that Luther enunciates his famous paradox: 'A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all' (Dillenberger 1961:53). In the context of his times Paul was willing to grant freedom of conscience to Christian believers in a wide variety of issues that were at that time highly contentious: freedom in matters of food and drink, freedom with regard to the observance of special days, freedom from the law, freedom in certain marital matters, freedom with regard to circumcision - as long as these freedoms were not abused to undermine the gospel or Christian morality. In an age when his fellow Jews had a horror of being defiled with unclean foods, Paul could counsel 'Eat anything sold in the meat market, without

raising questions of conscience, for "the earth is the Lord's, and everything in it" (1 Cor. 10.25-26). Such freedom was moderated in practice by a concern for the scruples of other believers and the desire not to cause unnecessary offence (1 Cor. 8.9). In the matter of the observance of special days, including the Jewish Sabbath, Paul was content to leave the matter to the conscience of the individual. 'One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind' (Romans 14.5). This extraordinarily liberal position has been simply too much to swallow for generations of Puritan influenced Protestant commentators who have laboured eruditely to show that 'the Lord's day cannot be included in what is here said' (Haldane 1958:597). But Paul simply reflects here the attitude to days, rites and outward ceremonies displayed in the words of Jesus when challenged on technicalities of Sabbath observance: 'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath' (Mark 2.27). In this expression Jesus drew attention to the diaconal nature of divine ordinances, even such a hallowed ordinance as the Sabbath, enshrined in the ten commandments, central to the covenantal relationship between God and his people, and a major pillar of Jewish religious practice. Such ordinances are servants, not tyrants. They are instituted to promote the salvation, wellbeing and comfort of God's people. To use them as instruments of oppression, condemnation and division is to miss the purpose of the One who ordained them. Hence the significance of the phrase 'the diaconal nature of baptism' in the heading of this paragraph. Baptism is given as a servant to the church, to promote the salvation, wellbeing and unity of God's people, and to be used as such with freedom of conscience. When baptism becomes a means to condemn fellow believers and to divide the church it is no longer serving the function for which it was given. For baptism to fulfil its divinely given function, it must be used with great freedom of conscience as befits the use of all those servants given for the benefit of humans.

To return to the freedom of conscience granted by Paul (and the rest of the New Testament writers, although not always with such clarity), it is necessary to consider briefly the issue of circumcision and possible implications for our thesis. When circumcision was insisted upon as a *sine*

qua non for salvation, Paul resisted it with all ferocity of one fiercely determined to defend the gospel of the grace of God, freely available to all who believe in Jesus (Galatians). Yet on another occasion Paul himself circumcises Timothy (Acts 16.3), precisely because he perceived such an action might promote the progress of the gospel. Paul was certainly not opposed to circumcision as such and would surely have opposed any attempt to ban it, just as he opposed attempts to enforce it. He simply wished believers to enjoy complete freedom of conscience in this matter, convinced that 'in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love' (Gal. 5.6). Would it be exceedingly heretical to suggest that if Paul were present in our time, the intricate and prolonged controversies over baptism might provoke him to say, in the interests of Christian unity and fellowship, 'Neither infant baptism nor believers' baptism is anything. Keeping God's commands is what counts'? And God's commands seem to speak far more clearly to the primary issues of Christian unity and love and fellowship than to the finer points of baptismal practice so acutely debated.

Many who might have read with sympathy the contents of this chapter so far could well find the last couple of sentences completely unacceptable. There is a deliberately shocking element in them (as Paul, too, sometimes used shock expressions for effect in driving a particular point home), so it is necessary to examine more carefully the intention behind them. The objection could be raised: 'Is there not in this thesis a tendency towards the trivialising of baptism, the kind of trivialising that has marred so much of Protestant 'evangelical' thinking about the sacrament, especially discernible among Baptist and Pentecostal groups?' Such an objection must be taken seriously and adequately answered as it is certainly not the intention of this thesis to trivialise baptism but rather to develop and promote such an understanding of baptism so that its saving and beneficial function in the ministry of the church might rather be enhanced. But this goal is not to be attained by exalting the sacrament of baptism at all costs, but rather by seeing baptism in its right perspective and diaconal function within the ministry of the gospel.

The expressions 'Jesus saves' and 'baptism saves' cannot be equated without further ado (although both are perfectly Scriptural and legitimate). God in Christ is the proper author and source of all human salvation. Baptism is an instrument in the administration of that salvation. Christ is the Lord of salvation, baptism is a servant. Baptism is indeed, in New Testament thinking, the normal way in which individuals put on Christ, or clothe themselves with Christ (Gal. 3.27). But it remains a 'way'; Christ is the Lord, the Giver, the Source. 'By grace we are saved through faith' (Eph. 2.8) expresses the primary biblical teaching that traces the source of human salvation to the grace of God, bestowed freely on all who call upon him in faith. In the New Testament baptism functions as a way (or rite) by which men and women 'call upon the Lord' in faith (Acts 9.17-18; 22.16) receiving the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. So there is always the closest possible conjunction between Christ, faith, divine grace, salvation and baptism. But in this close relationship, baptism always serves as the instrument, the servant. It is with this perspective in view that the words of Paul to the Corinthians can be properly understood: 'For Christ did not send me to baptise, but to preach the gospel' (1 Cor. 1.17). Paul's words, too, could be seen as a trivialising of baptism, and, indeed, have often been abused to that end. But the context of this expression of Paul's makes his intentions clear. The church at Corinth was troubled by divisions between factions who were unduly exalting various leaders and ministers, namely Apollos, Cephas and Paul. It is easy to imagine that in the devotion given to these different leaders, not only was the superiority of their doctrine magnified, but possibly also special pride expressed in baptism received by them. This, at any rate, might partly account for the disclaimer by Paul: 'I am thankful that I did not baptise any of you except Crispus and Gaius ... For Christ did not send me to baptise, but to preach the gospel' (1 Cor. 1.14, 17). Paul is concerned to put everything in proper perspective. The gospel is supreme, baptism a servant of the gospel. Christ alone is Lord and the only true foundation for Christian faith, and as for Apollos, Paul and others, they are 'only servants, through whom you came to believe' (1 Cor. 3.5). Paul had no intention to trivialise, or even less to negate, the vital role played by Christian preachers and Christian baptism in the ministry of the gospel. His only concern was to ensure that

those persons and sacraments ordained as servants be not unduly exalted so as to become a source of division and strife rather than functioning to promote unity, love and faith in the church.

Among certain contemporary Catholic theologians there has been a tendency, in the discussion of the sacraments and their role in salvation, to shift the focus to the sacramental nature of the church, and even to see Christ as the supreme sacrament of God. *Christ the Sacrament of Encounter with God* by Schillebeeckx (1963) can be mentioned as an example. This trend is to be welcomed as it serves to focus attention on the great saving acts of God: Christ the Redeemer, his saving death, his life giving resurrection. Insofar as baptism serves the role of actualising, confessing, confirming, aiding and promoting faith in Christ (whether it be in the context of the mature convert to Christ or the child brought up in a Christian home), it serves a valuable ministry. It is, indeed, a wise ordinance of God. But it remains a servant in the administration of the manifold grace of God. Baptism exists for the church, and not the church for baptism. The servant can be dispensed with, although it is always unwise to neglect those useful servants provided by the Lord for the church in his bounty. This *non-necessity* of baptism has always been recognised by the various traditions, although always in a very careful way to guard against misunderstandings leading to any view regarding baptism as being superfluous. Those churches with a more sacramental understanding of baptism have been specially cautious in speaking of any non-necessity of baptism. Berkouwer states: 'The Reformed opposition to sacramentalism expressed in its speaking of the non-necessity of the sacrament, evinces not a *lesser* appreciation of the sacrament but a *different* appreciation' (Berkouwer 1981:109). In his discussion of the Catholic concepts of baptism of blood and baptism of desire, Walsh writes: 'About Baptism it says that the reality of the sacrament is brought about essentially by faith in Christ and sharing in his death: any significant human action that manifests these choices unequivocally is entitled to be called a Baptism' (Walsh 1988:98). Walsh simply reflects the traditional teaching of the Roman Catholic Church enunciated many centuries earlier by no less than Aquinas, who, when also discussing baptism by desire, wrote of the possibility of a person achieving salvation 'without actual baptism,

because of his desire for it; a desire which arises from *faith working through love*, through which God inwardly sanctifies him, not having limited his power to the visible sacraments' (Aquinas 1991:564).

The point being made in the above paragraph is that even in those churches (such as the Roman Catholic Church) which have a strongly sacramental understanding of baptism (and its necessity) there is still room for a freedom of conscience that is in accordance with their own tradition. And if there is to be any progress towards reconciliation and unity in the area of baptismal differences it is vital that Christian believers in every tradition be granted full freedom of conscience in this matter. Such freedom of conscience in baptismal matters is not merely a matter of pragmatic expediency but rather a matter of faithfulness to the gospel itself and obedience to the apostolic injunctions contained in the Holy Scriptures. This section on the importance of freedom of conscience will be closed by three quotations related to this liberty, the one by F F Bruce, the second by Martin Luther and the third a declaration of the Baptist World Congress held at Atlanta, Georgia, in 1939:

Paul enjoyed his Christian liberty to the full. Never was there a Christian more thoroughly emancipated from un-Christian inhibitions and taboos. So completely emancipated was he from spiritual bondage that he was not even in bondage to his emancipation. He conformed to the Jewish way of life when he was in Jewish society as cheerfully as he accommodated himself to Gentile ways when he was living with Gentiles. The interests of the gospel and the highest well-being of men and women were paramount considerations with him, and to these he subordinated everything else (Bruce 1983:243).

What the Apostle teaches is that in the new Law everything is free and nothing necessary for those who believe in Christ, except "charity out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned" (1 Tim. 1:5). In Galatians 6:15 he writes: "In Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature." [...] All is free, and only humility, love, and what else the Apostle inculcates must be observed. Against this

liberty, for which the Apostle contends, many false apostles raised their voice to mislead the people to do certain things as though these were necessary. Against such errorists the Apostle took the offensive with an amazing zeal (Luther 1985:195).

Voluntariness in personal and corporate worship, institution and service is essential to vital religion and to spiritual development of society. No man, no government nor institution, religious or civil, social or economic, has the right to dictate how a person may worship God or whether he shall worship God at all. In continuance of our consistent Baptist practice, we are imperatively constrained again to insist upon the full maintenance of absolute religious liberty for every man of every faith and no faith (Cook 1973:249).

12.3 Proposals Having laid down the two basic thoughts of this chapter, namely the importance of freedom of conscience in baptismal matters resulting from the diaconal nature of baptism, it is now necessary to proceed to certain definite proposals.

12.3.1 The baptism of infants ought not to be forbidden nor enforced This proposal is particularly difficult for those believers and churches with a long history of opposition to the practice of infant baptism. Of the 69 respondents coming from credobaptist churches a clear majority were opposed to the practice of infant baptism being even permitted in the church. Likewise, a majority were opposed to the acceptance into church membership of those (only) baptised as infants. Only a minority of Paedobaptists, on the other hand, were in favour of enforcing the practice of infant baptism in their churches. The challenge here is primarily (although not only) to credobaptist churches to allow freedom of conscience to their members and adherents in the matter of infant baptism. There are weighty reasons why they should do so. It is undeniably an ancient practice dating back to at least the third century. Intense historical studies and investigations (see chapter 6, 'The Historical Question') have not been able to establish beyond doubt that the apostolic church baptised infants or that it did not. It has been widely recognised that ultimately the question must be resolved on

theological rather than historical grounds (Reiling 1965:201). But therein lies the problem. Literally thousands of books, tracts and pamphlets have been produced arguing the case for or against infant baptism with varying degrees of erudition and conviction. That both sides have compelling and theologically weighty arguments can hardly be denied. The inclusion, at the beginning of this thesis, of summaries of a Catholic, a Reformed and a Baptist approach to baptism was intended to make precisely this point. Who can read through these works seriously and not acknowledge that the arguments are at least theologically and exegetically respectable and weighty, though not, perhaps, finally convincing?

To the above considerations must be added the long list of Christian leaders, writers and preachers who have been universally acclaimed for their faith, holiness and usefulness and who have been staunch defenders of infant baptism. Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Wesley, Whitefield are just some of the names that come to mind. In the words of the theologically uneducated but nevertheless astute man in the gospels who was healed of blindness, 'We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly man who does his will' (John 9.31). Do not all these considerations demand freedom of conscience being granted to individual believers in matters of baptism? This state of affairs has been frankly recognised by the ecumenical team of scholars that produced the BEM document considered in chapter 10 (Towards an Ecumenical Consensus 1977:7).

Not only have those for and against the practice of infant baptism produced impressive works of historical investigation and theological argument, but both parties can lay claim to an ancient pedigree going back to apostolic times. There is an 'apostolic succession', so to speak, for both the paedobaptist and the credobaptist positions. Admittedly, from the fourth century onwards the paedobaptist position has been very much predominant in the church, but then it must be remembered that opposition to infant baptism was legally prohibited from the fourth century onwards with severe penalties inflicted upon offenders (Roy 1987:122). Nevertheless, church histories such as 'The Pilgrim Church' by E H Broadbent (1974) have been written in the conviction that 'there never has been a generation without simple local congregations of believers existing

who succeeded in maintaining these principles'. The principles referred to are those maintained by Christians known as the 'Brethren' of which Broadbent is an adherent, and include the practice of believers' baptism. With the increase of religious freedom in the last few centuries, credobaptist churches have flourished to the point that they now represent a significant community worldwide, and rapidly growing (Roy 1987: 9-10).

Once again, all these facts point to the need of freedom of conscience in the matter of infant baptism. The only alternative is to allow differences in this area to divide Christians into separate churches, and such an action is theologically indefensible, as has been argued in chapter 7 (Baptism and Unity) as well as elsewhere in this thesis. Whatever sins and errors are involved, either in the practice of infant baptism or in the rejection of infant baptism, none of these sins are as serious as that of promoting schism between Christians on grounds of baptismal differences. The exclusion by any Christian church of believers on the grounds of their attachment to or rejection of infant baptism is morally indefensible in the light of powerful Scriptural admonitions to accept one another, to bear with one another and to love one another even in the face of varying opinions. Quite apart from the clear moral issues involved, there are absurdities implied in the official policies of many churches that ought to provoke thought. Imagine a Reformed church having to discipline a Charles Spurgeon, a John Bunyon or a William Carey on account of their heretical tendencies. Imagine a Baptist church informing a Calvin, a Luther or a Wesley that they were not eligible for church membership!

12.3.2 The 'rebaptism' of those baptised in infancy ought not to be forbidden or enforced Perhaps even more than the issue of infant baptism, the issue of rebaptism is an acutely sensitive one. Evidence of this is the 65% of the 113 paedobaptist respondents considered in the previous chapter who rejected any possibility of the church permitting such an option. Yet 69% of the same respondents were in favour of the accommodation of differing baptismal convictions in one congregation, without considering, perhaps, that the latter (accommodation) demands the possibility of the former (rebaptism). The fact is that there are many Christian believers who have sincere

doubts about the validity of their baptism as infants (for a variety of reasons) and therefore have scruples of conscience as to whether they have been baptised at all. To deny such people the possibility of obeying their conscience (rightly or wrongly informed) is effectively to drive them out of the church and thus to be guilty (or at least to share in the guilt) of promoting schism in the body of Christ. It goes without saying, of course, that those convinced of the validity of infant baptism have every right to seek to persuade others who doubt of the correctness of the practice. But what if they do not succeed in resolving such doubts? Must those who feel conscience bound to seek baptism as believers be penalised?

A strong objection could be raised at this point. What of the once-for-all nature of baptism? Does not Scripture speak of one baptism, even as it speaks of one Lord, one God and Father of us all (Eph 4.5-6)? Whatever legitimate doubts there may be about aspects of the mode and time of baptism, surely this is one area in which there are clear theological and Scriptural principles which must command the assent of all? There can only be one birth into the Kingdom of God just as there is only one physical birth resulting in human life. Baptism, which corresponds to this birth, must therefore be a once-for-all event, unrepeatable by its very nature. All of this is very true, but it does not solve the problem. The problem is that there are those who are not convinced that they have been baptised at all. For them, it is not a question of whether they should be rebaptised but whether they have ever been baptised. Probably the great majority of Baptists and other Credobaptists would agree that baptism is a once-for-all event, and would oppose the practice of rebaptism. They do not see themselves as rebaptisers but as baptisers. For this reason such groups have been content to be called 'Baptists', but have never accepted the label 'Anabaptist'.

Everything said in 12.3.1 above has equal application here. However compelling and carefully reasoned the arguments in favour of the practice of infant baptism are, there are (and probably always will be) those for whom these arguments are not finally conclusive and convincing. Such must be given the opportunity and freedom to act in accordance with their conscience, to request and to receive baptism as believers. For the

arguments that insist on confession of faith by the candidate as an essential and normal part of Christian baptism are also compelling and well reasoned. In fact the credobaptist position has the advantage of being more obviously attested to in the New Testament while the paedobaptist position is more dependent on carefully reasoned theological deductions. And those who have put forward and defended the credobaptist position include many illustrious names universally honoured and respected by all Christians for their outstanding contribution to the progress of the gospel and building up of the church. John Bunyon, William Carey and Charles Spurgeon have already been mentioned. Billy Graham could be added to the list. Whatever errors these persons might have had in their baptismal views, they do not seem to have hindered their usefulness in Christian service. (While Billy Graham's Baptist affiliations are well known, what is perhaps not so widely known are the paedobaptist convictions of his wife, Ruth, convictions that no Southern Baptist pastor has ever been able to change, despite the playful offer of a reward by Billy! This is perhaps a wonderful example of how credobaptist and paedobaptist can cooperate and coexist fruitfully together in the ministry of the gospel!)

This proposal cuts both ways, of course. If the challenge to traditionally paedobaptist churches is to permit freedom of conscience to those desiring baptism as believers, the challenge to traditionally credobaptist churches is to allow freedom of conscience to those satisfied with the validity of their baptism as infants, and not to try and enforce believers' baptism on them by insisting on it, for example, as a condition for church membership. Of the 70 credobaptist respondents considered in the previous chapter, 57% were not in favour of accepting paedobaptists into membership in the church if they were not willing to be baptised 'again' as believers.

Yet another objection that could be raised against the proposal under consideration is this: 'Practically and realistically speaking, would not such untrammelled liberty of conscience in matters of baptismal practice lead to pandemonium and disorder in the church with every one doing whatever they think right in their own eyes, wasting valuable time and

energy in ceaseless discussions and arguments over baptismal issues?' With this objection in mind, we need to turn to the third and most important proposal in this chapter.

12.3.3 Mutual respect of differing baptismal convictions is imperative for Christian unity While exegetes and theologians will differ as to the details of apostolic baptismal practice precisely because of the tantalizingly little information on the subject, no one can doubt the abundance of Scriptural and apostolic exhortations to mutual love and respect in those areas of legitimate differences between Christian believers who nevertheless stand together in believing the good news of the grace of God revealed through Christ Jesus. So while freedom of individual conscience in baptismal practice is being strongly argued for in this thesis, this freedom is always to be understood within the parameters of the grand themes of unity, love and reconciliation between Christian believers. Therefore it is always to be insisted upon that such freedom can never and must never be abused to undermine or threaten the same unity and love. This is the thrust of Paul's letter to the Galatians where he strongly maintains the freedom of Christian believers in relation to particular rites and ceremonies and at the same time just as strongly urges against the abuse of that freedom in undermining the spirit of love and unity in the church.

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. ... You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbour as yourself." If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other (Gal.5.1, 13-15).

This then is the answer to those fears expressed above that the freedom being advocated would result in pandemonium and disorder in the church. It is a freedom to promote unity, not division, mutual respect and not contempt, good order and not disorder. Practically speaking, we can spell out in even greater detail the implications of this concept in a

particular case. Those, for example, raised in a traditionally paedobaptist church who desire the freedom to be baptised as believers for reasons of conscience may not abuse that freedom to question the integrity and obedience of fellow believers otherwise convinced. The same freedom and respect they desire for themselves and their convictions they must be willing to grant to others. This is in accordance with the most primary precept of the gospel: 'in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets' (Matthew 7.12). Nothing could be more inconsistent than a person claiming the right to follow his or her conscience in baptism and then speaking in a belittling and contemptuous way of others who do not follow in the same way. This would be a clear example of that 'biting and devouring each other' which the apostle Paul warned against so strenuously. The church may not become a battle ground between contending baptismal convictions, and those who would want to turn it into such (from whatever angle they are coming) would be guilty of transgressing the law of love which must always be the chief principle governing the relations of Christians to one another. When the apostle Paul appealed to the believers in Corinth to 'agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought' (1 Cor. 1.10), he surely did not have in mind the perfect unanimity which agrees on every point of doctrine and practice, but the kind of agreement which does not allow permissible differences to become sources of contention and division.

There is yet another implication for that freedom 'serving in love' here being advocated. It takes cognizance not only of personal convictions but also of the convictions and sensitivities of others. This means, for example, that those considering 'rebaptism' will be led not only by their own conscience and convictions but also by a concern for others who might be offended or distressed by such an action. This could mean refraining from such an action for the sake of others. Paul also spoke of the necessity of being willing to voluntarily restrict one's personal freedom for the sake of 'the other man's conscience' (1 Cor. 10.29). Such sensitivity and concern for the feelings and scruples of others is binding not only on individuals but also on churches. How much sensitivity, for example, is shown by Baptist churches which openly advocate the rebaptism

of all those baptised as infants, or by paedobaptist churches which excommunicate their members for the 'sin' of rebaptism? 'Each of us should please his neighbour for his good, to build him up. ... Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God' (Rom. 15. 2, 7).

It must be emphasised again that what is here being advocated is not some kind of superficial 'liberalism', motivated by a lack of doctrinal conviction or a rationalistic scepticism concerning spiritual certainties. Rather it is an attempt to reflect the authentic freedom of the Christian believer that is rooted in the gospel itself and completely compatible with a firm commitment to the verities of the Christian faith. No one would question the apostle's Paul's deep and passionate commitment to the gospel of the grace of God, yet this same Paul displayed a liberality of spirit and flexibility of policy on a wide variety of issues that has rarely been equalled in Christian history. When he discerned that the essence of the gospel was at stake, Paul was severity itself, calling down anathemas on those who compromised the foundations of the good news of Christ. To the Galatians, troubled by Judaizers wanting to make law observance a condition of salvation he warned: 'But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!' (Gal. 1.8). Possibly the same group were in mind when he warned the Philipians: 'Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh. ... Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame' (Phil. 3.2, 19). In a letter to the Corinthians Paul again had reason to warn the believers against those whom he branded as 'false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve' (2 Cor. 11. 13-15).

This was the severity of Paul, aroused by those who undermined the gospel or brought it into disrepute by their behaviour. His broad and liberal flexibility in areas of legitimate differences between Christians we have already considered in 12.2 above, particularly in the areas of Sabbath

observance, food and drink, and rites of circumcision. In addition to these, mention could be made of the personal freedom permitted by Paul in giving, and in certain marriage questions. Concerning financial support of Christian ministries, Paul simply counselled 'Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver' (2 Cor.9.7) - no insistence on a legal tithe so beloved of many churches today. On the matter of marriage, despite his obvious personal preference for celibacy, Paul grants all believers the freedom to marry or not to marry, emphasizing the dignity and honour of both conditions (1 Cor.7) (The major part of Catholic Christendom does not allow that degree of freedom to this day). He also permits believers to marry again - although only under certain conditions and 'in the Lord', which is a criterion for any Christian action.

It is this which is being advocated in this thesis, a liberal flexibility in areas of legitimate differences between Christians firmly rooted in the unshakable convictions of the saving acts of God in Christ. Of course the question will inevitably arise: 'Where do you draw the line? Who determines what are permissible differences between Christians and those which cannot be tolerated?' And it must be immediately confessed that there is no simple answer to that question, no straightforward formula to show the difference. Christians have always struggled to answer that question at different times in history and in the context of specific issues. It is the task of theology to attempt to answer such questions, not only the theology done by professional theologians in theological institutions but also the theology done in the churches by all believers as they debate and discuss the implications of the Christian faith for their time and situation. That is why this thesis is being written. It is an attempt to provide a convincing and reasoned theological basis for the claim that most of the traditional differences between Christians on baptismal issues are, in fact, legitimate differences which can and must be accommodated within the unity of one Christian fellowship according to the demands of the gospel itself.

The three proposals made so far have far reaching and costly implications for most churches. For credobaptist churches to desist from denigrating

and treating with contempt the doctrine and practice of infant baptism and to make room for believers with such convictions to join their fellowship and be granted freedom to act in accordance with their conscience and convictions - this would be costly indeed for such churches (George Shriver, 1969:423, has described how some Southern Baptist churches have been disciplined for adopting 'open membership' clauses in their constitutions). For paedobaptist churches to desist from condemning and rejecting those who feel led to seek baptism as believers and even to make room within the church for those of such convictions and provide the opportunity for them to receive what they desire - this would be costly for such churches. And for all Christians to cultivate an attitude of respect and tolerance for baptismal views other than their own and to resist the temptation to look down on them as spiritually inferior or naive - this too is costly. In each case it is costly because it involves a certain backing down from previous positions deeply entrenched by centuries of polemical apologetics. It involves loss of face. It smacks of retreat from principle. It is humiliating, and requires becoming accustomed to strange and unfamiliar practices within the church. All this is costly. Yet it is the kind of cost demanded by the gospel of reconciliation, the kind of cost required of the first century Jews in admitting Gentiles into the church. The gospel is set in the world as a force for the reconciliation of the world, to break down the many age old barriers separating peoples into hostile opposing camps; barriers of a social, ethnic, economic and cultural kind. Surely such a gospel requires that Christians make a more serious effort at demolishing the barriers that keep them apart from one another?

12.4 A Practical Model? In the above proposals (12.3.1-3) a model of a kind has been described, a model characterised by freedom of conscience and mutual respect in baptismal matters, leaving parents the freedom to baptise their children or not, and believers the freedom to accept the legitimacy of their baptism as infants, or, if they cannot, to request and receive baptism as believers. But surely, it could be argued, this presupposes a completely hypothetical and artificial situation. People do not come to conclusions in a vacuum. There can be no neutrality in the church on any issue. In practice, people are taught some particular

doctrine which becomes their own 'received' doctrine (unless some outside contrary view manages to persuade them otherwise). How can the official position of a church be both paedobaptist and credobaptist? The reality must be accepted that the overwhelming majority of churches in the world are (and will be for the foreseeable future) paedobaptist or credobaptist in their official policy. What then is being advocated in this thesis is that while it is recognised that a church has an official position, the alternative position will be fairly and respectfully represented, and room for its practice permitted for those so persuaded. In the case studies examined in chapter 10 of this thesis it can be seen that what is being advocated is not only a possibility but has been successfully applied in certain instances. The Jesuit scholar Joseph Egan, writing in the journal *Review and Expositor* has argued that diversity of practice is of the very essence of the catholicity of the Christian faith:

Plurality and diversity of practice and theology have been characteristic of the Church's life from the very beginning. This was particularly true concerning both the practice and theology of Christian initiation in the early centuries. The Church can therefore accept a diversity of models of Christian initiation practice today. For legitimate plurality and diversity are necessary for the Church's full dynamic life in the Spirit (Egan 1980:51).

How would this model affect pastors, priests or church leaders? Would they be expected to administer baptisms contrary to their own convictions and conscience? Certainly not. This thesis has argued for maximum freedom of conscience for all Christians in baptismal matters. The same must surely apply to those in positions of Christian leadership who could not, therefore, be obliged to administer a baptism that was contrary to their own convictions. Of all the respondents considered in the previous chapter, a full 50% agreed that a pastor should be free to administer or to refrain from administering certain kinds of baptism. What of the possible problems that this could lead to? The infant brought to a pastor who feels unable in good conscience to administer baptism to that infant? The believer requesting baptism from a pastor who is persuaded that that same person was legitimately baptised as an infant and ought not to be

baptised again? In all such cases, the baptism could be performed by anyone in the church (or even from outside that particular congregation) who is able to do so in good conscience, presuming, of course, that all is done in accordance with the the policy and order of the church concerning these matters. This is the reason why the significance and biblical foundation of lay baptism has received attention in this thesis. It is also of interest to note that only 25% of the respondents surveyed in chapter 10 felt that the administration of baptism should be restricted to ordained ministers. And if we take the respondents *other than* the 50 Dutch Reformed students at Pretoria University, the figure drops to 14%.

So the freedom of conscience and flexibility of action in baptismal matters being advocated is a very comprehensive one. It applies to parents in relation to their children, believers in relation to themselves and to pastors and lay members in relation to their ministry. A formula for complete chaos? Not necessarily. When no one needs to feel threatened by the convictions and actions of others and all are committed to mutual respect, love and acceptance then a remarkable diversity can coexist with wonderful harmony. Some small measure of the reality of this possibility has been seen in some of the case studies examined in chapter 10. The following quotations all bear witness to a growing conviction that the coexistence of differing baptismal convictions in a unity of fellowship is both possible and desirable. The first quotation comes from a Faith and Order Paper, the second is a comment by a Dutch scholar on the general reception of BEM, the third is an Anglican comment from a report produced by a conference on baptism held in Nottingham, and the fourth is taken from an article written by the well known Presbyterian scholar from the University of Edinburgh, David Wright.

In view of the notable agreement on the meaning of baptism, it is not surprising that there are replies which explicitly state that it is possible for infant and believers' baptism to co-exist in one church. This raises the question of whether this practice could be expanded in order to promote wider consensus (Towards an Ecumenical Consensus 1977: 7).

Men heeft over het algemeen geen moeite met de erkenning en relatieve waardering voor zowel kinderdoop als doop op belijdenis, mits de beide plaatsvinden in de gemeente (Mooi 1987:6).

We have to recognise differences that exist amongst us about baptism, and the nature of the confession of faith. These, however, are issues that will be resolved as we draw closer together. In particular we believe that in a united Church the co-existence of patterns of initiation, including both believers' baptism and infant baptism, will itself lead to a fresh appreciation of the insights they reflect, without being destructive of the unity we wish to attain or compromising the question of achieving a common practice subsequently (Hurley 1968:45).

If, with our evangelical commitment to the supreme authority and the clarity of scripture, we have been unable to find a route through the baptismal impasse (a bridge across the baptismal gulf), ought we not to start thinking about a biblical frame of reference in which we can agree to accept and live with both baptismal traditions? It is at least worth considering (Wright 1988:15).

In addition to the above statements, we again draw attention to 68% of all the respondents considered in chapter 11 who expressed their agreement that it is possible for Christians having differing baptismal convictions to be accommodated within one congregation.

12.5 A Necessary Model More than being a practical model, the model under consideration is a necessary model. It is necessary as a demonstration of what Christian love and unity is all about in practice, a unity in Christ that permits diversity of thought and action within the parameters of commitment to Christ and the good news of his saving grace. Such a model is also necessary for the liberation of baptism, its liberation from the inevitable apologetic that so often accompanies baptismal occasions, the self defence of the particular 'correct' rite being administered over against other 'erroneous' rites. Being liberated from such negative polemical aspects the focus in baptismal occasions can

be more fully on the joyful celebration of the manifold grace of God poured out so freely upon his people through the gospel. The baptism of an infant is indeed an occasion to celebrate the grace of a covenant keeping God who declared to Abraham, the father of all believers: 'I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you' (Gen.17.7). David, too, rejoiced in the gracious lovingkindness of the Lord that extends to the posterity of those who love him, 'from everlasting to everlasting the LORD's love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children's children - with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts' (Ps.103.17). While those of credobaptist persuasion would not themselves see the baptism of infants as the necessary expression of such truths, yet the truth itself that the God of all grace is a covenant keeping God is the common possession and heritage of all Christians, and one in which all believers can rejoice together.

Likewise the baptism of penitents, consciously turning from their sins and requesting the grace of baptism is an occasion to celebrate the converting grace of God who calls us 'out of darkness into his wonderful light' (1 Peter 2.9). While Paedobaptists would not see the necessity of the rebaptism of those deemed to be already children of the covenant (Reformed) or children of God by baptism (Catholic), yet they, with all Christians, can rejoice in the restoring grace of God by which the prodigal son returns to his father (Luke 15), the unfaithful wife returns to her husband (Hosea) and the lost sheep is found by the Good Shepherd (Luke 15). Even Ezekiel speaks of the 'rebaptism' of God's own covenant people as a result of his converting and regenerating grace:

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. You will live in the land I gave your forefathers; you will be my people, and I will be your God (Ezek.36.25-28).

Every baptism, of whatever kind, bears witness to some aspect of the manifold grace of God revealed to humankind through the gospel: the baptism of infants, demonstrating the solidarity of the family as the object of God's saving actions; the baptism of teenagers raised in the church, demonstrating the importance of personal faith; the baptism of non Christian converts, demonstrating the universal scope of God's saving actions extending to every tribe people and nation; the baptism (rebaptism) of lapsed Christians, demonstrating the forgiveness and longsuffering patience of God with his own unfaithful and adulterous (or simply ill instructed) people. While it may not be possible for all Christians to give their full approval to every kind of baptism just mentioned, they can at least, in charity and solidarity with fellow believers, rejoice gladly in those gospel truths that are therein confessed and celebrated. The need to recognise the spiritual truths celebrated in differing baptismal occasions has been expressed by the Roman Catholic author and spiritual director, Francis MacNutt:

We can agree, then, that there are strong practical reasons for infant baptism, as well as for adult baptism. These strong reasons have led their proponents into confrontation and even into the setting up of new divisions in Christendom. But can't there be a way of reconciling these two positions, so that the spiritual advantages of both types of baptism can be preserved - without theological compromise? (MacNutt 1984:160).

This thesis is an attempt to provide that for which MacNutt pleads, a theological basis for the reconciliation of traditionally separate baptismal practices. The necessity of this task is widely recognised, as witnessed by so many cries for a unity which can transcend baptismal differences and help to remove the scandal of divisions in the body of Christ. König has written:

Is dit werklik onmoontlik vir die kerke om mekaar te vind oor die kinderdoop? Is dit werklik nodig om aan die bestaande verskille oor die kinderdoop kerkskeurende waarde toe te ken? Sou dit ook moontlik

wees om meer as een dooppraktyk in dieselfde kerk te handhaaf?
(König 1979: 1).

Is it really impossible for the churches to come to some kind of understanding concerning infant baptism? Must disagreement over infant baptism necessarily require schism? Is it not possible for more than one baptismal practice to exist in the same church? (König 1979: 1 translation).

In response to König's question the answer is offered: it is possible and furthermore it is necessary. The gospel itself demands it. In the following two quotations we hear an Anglican scholar and a Baptist writer speaking in much the same spirit of concern about the breach of communion occasioned by baptismal differences:

... let me say that I think that, whatever may have been true in the past, such a strong case may be made for both sets of procedures and such grave objections can be brought against both, that we need a new charity and patience in discussing them. Honest differences between us should certainly not be made an occasion of breach of communion, as they too often have been (Jenkins 1965: 56).

It is because Scripture is silent that Christians can legitimately hold different views as to who should be baptised. They always have done, still do and probably always will. What is important is that those views should be held in love, understanding and humility, with a willingness to seek forgiveness for past sins, and a desire to let the water that divides divide no longer (Bridge & Phypers 1977: 184).

The note of repentance sounded in the last quotation is an important one. There can be no reconciliation without repentance, and the chief sin from which all traditions must repent is the sin of schism brought about by a spirit of intolerance of differing baptismal views and practices. Whatever errors may or may not be involved in particular forms of baptism (infant baptism, rebaptism), these errors fade into insignificance besides the glaring inconsistency of attributing to such differences 'kerkskeurende

waarde', of allowing them to become an occasion for the breach of communion between believers in the Lord Jesus Christ.

A recent edition of the journal of the Union Theological Seminary, *Interpretation* (July 1993), is devoted to the theme of 'Baptism'. With almost monotonous predictability the journal contains an article by a Lutheran who skilfully shows that 'the necessity for baptizing infants is grounded not in human will or doing but solely in the will and Word of God' (Forde 1993:229), followed by an article by a Reformed Baptist who faithfully demonstrates that only believers' baptism 'makes allowance for the genuinely free and responsible role that repentance and faith must play in baptism' (George 1993:242). No attempt is made to seek reconciliation between the two positions. It seems that Christendom must either continue repeating *ad infinitum* ever increasingly subtle and refined arguments for or against a particular position, or come to a decision that baptismal differences cannot be allowed to perpetuate divisions within the body of Christ and that both practices (with their theologies, debates and all) must henceforth be permitted within a united Christian fellowship. In such a fellowship the discussion can continue in honesty and integrity, but in a spirit of mutual acceptance and love. Only the latter course is consistent with the gospel of reconciliation through Christ.

12.6 A Dynamic Model The model that has been advocated in this chapter, with its strong emphasis on personal freedom and flexibility of action, not only reflects the deep and powerful biblical themes of unity in diversity, but opens the way for new dimensions of outreach and evangelism which are really the subject of a separate work and will only be hinted at here. In his magisterial work on evangelism, Michael Green has alluded to the primary function of baptism in the spontaneous expansion of the early church. Concerning baptism he writes:

That is the badge of Christian belonging, and it should be conferred as soon as possible after the person is clearly committed to Christ. At least, that is what the early Christians believed. They baptised upon profession of faith. There was certainly careful catechesis, but

it seems to have happened after baptism, not before. It might be argued that this is a risky procedure. It is. But they did it because the new Christian soldier had every right to his uniform. They did it because baptism was not the mark of mature Christian discipleship but of raw Christian beginning (Green 1993:285).

It has been argued earlier in this thesis that the rapid and spontaneous expansion of the early church, as recorded in the book of Acts, was largely due to the personal witness and ministry of ordinary believers, and that this ministry included the immediate baptism of all who responded to the message of the gospel with the desire to become Christians. Later on, the administration of baptism was largely restricted to the officially ordained clergy of the church, and this has remained the pattern until the present time. Today there is a renewed emphasis on the importance of 'lay ministry' for the health and increase of the church. If all Christian believers were to be encouraged and empowered, not only to bear witness to Christ, but also to baptise those desiring to receive Christ, this could have positive implications for the evangelistic outreach of the church. In many non Christian communities (eg secular, Muslim, Jewish) there is a resistance on the part of many people to submitting to the formal, public, official ecclesiastical ceremony of baptism. Sometimes there are cultural obstacles. Sometimes (as in Muslim lands) it is dangerous. But often these same people have an intense personal interest in Jesus and a desire to be reconciled to God through him. The recovery to the church of the ministry of immediate, lay baptism could be an important key to the fulfilment of the remaining evangelistic task of the church. But this thought will not be further pursued here as it raises many further questions and problems of a theological and ecclesiastical kind which would need proper consideration. It is only mentioned in passing as an indication of some of the wider implications of the central thrust of this thesis. While the importance of Christian unity has been very much in the foreground of this work, it must never be forgotten that the purpose of Christian unity is 'that the world may believe' (John 17:21) and be reconciled to God through Jesus Christ.

CHAPTER 13

CONCLUSION

13.1 Preface In a way the central idea of this thesis, which is also its conclusion, has already been stated in many places in the thesis and perhaps most fully in the last chapter, *A Model for Reconciliation*, where clear and definite proposals were made concerning the mutual acceptance of baptismal practices as a way towards reconciliation and unity between Christians traditionally separated from one another over baptismal issues. This central idea is a very simple idea - that Christians ought not to allow their fellowship and communion with one another to be broken over differences in baptismal understanding and practice. The idea is not an original one. On the contrary it could almost be described as a commonplace among millions of Christians all over the world. Notwithstanding this, however, it is an idea that has failed to make any significant impact on the official policies of the great majority of churches in the world. Hence the many words that have been written about a simple idea in this thesis. Whatever might be original in this thesis is not the central idea itself but the attempt to provide a reasoned theological basis for its acceptance and implementation.

13.2 A historical parallel There is, perhaps, a certain parallel between this idea and another very simple idea, widely accepted today and yet not so long ago just as widely rejected - the idea that Christians ought to be free to worship God according to their conscience without coercion. Freedom of worship is universally accepted today, especially among Christians (and by many others as well); so much so that the idea seems obvious, so simple that a child can understand it. Yet only four hundred years ago this was just an idea, believed by a few but practised nowhere. Since the days of Emperor Theodosius the denial of the Trinity was considered 'both a theological-religious error as well as *lèse majesté*, offense against the state' (Mueller 1973:574). Church and state were so closely linked that 'any fundamental criticism, any forming of a new communion, even pacifism, appeared to be seditious' (Manschreck

1974:213). Beza, Calvin's successor in Geneva, boldly declared the concept of religious freedom 'a most diabolical dogma, because it means that everyone should be left to go to hell in his own way' (Mueller 1973:575). Even mild mannered churchmen of the sixteenth century like Haller, Capito, and Oecolampadius finally yielded, though reluctantly, to the compelling logic of persecution in order to maintain 'the ideal of a unified civil and religious community', the vision of a *Corpus Christianum*, a complete civic and religious solidarity (Krieder 1972:181). In seventeenth century Massachusetts Bay Colony, established by Puritans who had experienced religious persecution in England, 'Baptists, Quakers and other sectaries were publicly whipped in the pillory, driven from their homes, and some were even killed for the sake of defense of the religious, orthodox establishment' (Mueller 1973:574). The idea of religious freedom, seemingly so obvious today, took a long time gaining acceptance, with many an argument, written in weighty tomes, being produced in its favour.

Anabaptists and Baptists were in the forefront of the struggle for freedom of worship. Their heroism and the sacrifices they made in that struggle are today almost universally recognised and honoured. Yet history has a strange way of reversing the roles of particular bodies. The central idea of this thesis, namely the freedom of individual believers to hold and to practise differing baptismal views in one and the same church, without coercion, is widely resisted by Christians in many traditions today but perhaps most strongly by Christians in credobaptist traditions. It must immediately be added that when the word 'coercion' is here used it is not to be understood in the sense of physical force, something enforced by civil authority by legal means. Nevertheless, the word 'coercion' is deliberately used as there are forms of coercion apart from the use of state empowered physical force. There are, for example, psychological forms of coercion. The power of churches to exclude from their fellowship and membership those who do not adhere to certain views is such a form of 'spiritual' coercion. Not that the use of such power is necessarily wrong. The church is, after all, a communion of people bound together by certain beliefs, and can exclude, therefore, those who reject such beliefs. What is being questioned is whether that power is rightly used when used to exclude certain people on grounds of their baptismal views.

13.3 Objections 'But if no force is involved', it could be objected, 'what is wrong? Surely it is a simple matter of freedom of choice? A church has a right to stipulate its requirements for membership just as individuals have the right to join the church of their choice. In this way all enjoy freedom of conscience and there is no coercion.' Such an objection reflects a popular, contemporary way of thinking. But it fails to take into account a certain number of realities, both social and psychological as well as theological. To begin with Christians form deep bonds of attachment to their church and the community of faith it represents. To force them into separation from that community over a secondary issue, such as baptism, in which primary issues of the faith itself are not being called into question, is often to cause deep and unnecessary trauma. There are also many practical cases, such as when Christians from different traditions (paedobaptist and credobaptist) marry. It is very difficult for them to find a church where both of them are fully accepted and can become members without any coercion (spiritual or psychological) on baptismal issues. The unhappy consequences in cases like this are that such couples sometimes become alienated from the church and even drift away from the faith. In addition to all such sociological considerations there remains the fundamental theological question: 'Is it right to exclude any believer from the fellowship of other believers on the grounds of baptismal differences?'

There is another objection to the central idea of this thesis that needs to be taken seriously. It could be stated as follows: 'In this age of spineless Christianity, when in the spirit of a broadminded and liberal approach to doctrinal and moral issues little is held sacred and virtually everything is questioned, should we be arguing for a more liberal flexibility in the area of baptism, one of the basic sacraments of the church?' It is generally true that while 'liberal' churches are in decline, 'conservative' churches, where members are committed to strict standards in belief and behaviour, are growing. David Edwards (1987:140) draws attention to the important publication in 1972 of the book *Why Conservative Churches are Growing*. The interesting thing about that publication is that its author, Dean Kelley, is a member of a leading 'liberal' Methodist denomination in the USA. David Edwards, Provost of

Southwark Cathedral in England and a self confessed liberal Anglican, made the following observations in one of his most recent publications *The Futures of Christianity*:

I have personal reason to acknowledge the spiritual power of this [conservative] movement. I spent some ten years of my life in the service of the Student Christian Movement, mainly as the editor of its publishing house, and fully shared its commitment to liberal scholarship, social relevance and Christian reunion. But the SCM became increasingly preoccupied with the politics of the left and with the morality of progressive humanism and seemed to have lost its Christian basis, at least in the eyes of those students who were prepared to join a society with 'Christian' in its title. Its numbers declined sharply in comparison with those of the Christian Unions or Evangelical Unions, which were based firmly on the Bible and prayer. The process which I witnessed in Britain was matched in the USA (where the University Christian Movement ceased to exist) and in many other countries. So I learnt in my own experience how the Evangelical emphasis has apparently proved stronger than 'liberalism', creating its own denominations or 'parachurch' movements as well as large groups within the historic churches (Edwards 1987:416-417).

It is undeniably true that those who are prepared to commit themselves to active Christian involvement do not want a 'liberal' church which seeks to remove all the sharp edges of Christianity and make it as easy as possible to follow the Christian way. On the contrary people are drawn to churches which maintain a clear witness to the truth, as they understand it, and take a strong stand on what is right and wrong, setting high standards and expecting people to keep them. But this thesis has been written from just such a conservative perspective (cf 1.3.1 The writer's vantage point), a principled stand on what is right and wrong on scriptural and theological principles. The argument for flexibility in baptismal practices must not be seen as a concession to 'worldly humanism' or a failure of nerve to take a clear stand on this subject. Rather the argument is grounded in the gospel itself and obedience to Christ and his law of love. Love, unity and reconciliation are demanded by the gospel. Flexibility of action and

mutual respect for one another in secondary matters are demanded by the law of love which is Christian faith in action and failure to render obedience in this area cannot be described as 'standing for the truth' but should rather be seen as compromise with the spirit of the world.

13.4 Liberal and Conservative The words 'liberal' and 'conservative' have cropped up a number of times in the last few paragraphs and a few comments are called for concerning the significance and usage of these words. By and large this thesis has tended to avoid the terminology of 'liberal' and 'conservative' as they tend to accentuate a tension and a polarisation which has had unfortunate consequences in the history of Christianity. The conservative-liberal tension is and always has been one of the most fundamental tensions within Christianity. It could be compared to the Catholic-Protestant tension within the Western church since the sixteenth century or the Ecumenical-Evangelical tension that has arisen among Protestants in more recent decades, but it is older than both of these. Indeed, we are speaking of a tension that is inherent to Christianity itself which is both a strongly conservative movement and a powerfully liberating movement.

Wherein lies Christianity's conservatism? It is a faith that is inseparably tied to certain alleged historical events which occurred thousands of years ago. Its sacred scriptures which function as its most authoritative written documents were produced nearly two thousand years ago, with most of them considerably older than that. The church has a mandate to 'keep the faith' and to 'hand on the traditions' (2 Thess. 2.15) received from the apostles and from the Lord Jesus himself. All of this amounts to a strongly conservative movement.

Wherein lies Christianity's liberalism? Down the ages the Christian faith has been a strong influence towards greater individual and social freedom. This has not been an automatic or a rapid process. Oftentimes Christian societies have been deeply oppressive and great injustices have been perpetrated in Christ's name. But if one should survey the broad range of freedoms that are almost taken for granted today - freedom of conscience and religion, freedom of speech and assembly, freedom from slavery, the

emancipation of women, freedom for workers - it will be seen that virtually all of them emerged in societies strongly influenced by Christianity and were fought for by individuals and groups deeply influenced by the spirit of Christianity. Even at the very foundation of Christianity, the attitude of Jesus and Paul to Jewish law and tradition could be described as 'liberal' over against that of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

The problem with freedom is that it so easily becomes licence; it is so often abused. Not that freedom itself is a problem and therefore undesirable. No! Freedom is good and the will of God. But it is of the very nature of freedom that it is open to abuse. Freedom from the law, for which Paul so strenuously argued (Gal. 3), can become antinomianism and thereafter open immorality - against which Paul warns in the same letter (Gal. 3.13). Freedom of conscience in secondary matters of doctrine and practice can slide into sceptical views about the faith and thereafter into open unbelief. Freedom of thought, inspired by Christian principles, can even spawn antichristian movements. It is significant that two of the most vicious totalitarian systems that the twentieth century has witnessed - Nazism and Communism - had their rise in the soil of 'Christian' Europe.

Thus it is that so many advances in human freedom, often inspired by Christian influences and equally often accompanied by serious abuses of that same freedom, have tended to provoke conservative reactions from those who desire to protect the faith. In this light we can understand many conservative manifestations of the Christian movement. The reactionary nature of nineteenth century Roman Catholicism, with its condemnation of democracy, toleration, freedom of conscience and freedom in general must be understood in the light of the excesses of the French Revolution, with its call to freedom, equality and fraternity together with its deistic and atheistic tendencies. The deep conservatism of early twentieth century Protestant Fundamentalism, for all its separatistic and obscurantist tendencies, must also be understood in the light of contemporary socio-political and philosophical trends, often with sceptical and atheistic undertones. In all these cases the conservative instinct does reflect (however dimly at times) a truly Christian instinct,

a strong concern to keep the faith at all costs and to defend it vigorously against every attack. But the liberal instinct is also an authentically Christian one, the desire to apply the Christian ethic of love in every area of life so as to promote greater freedom, justice, unity and such like social benefits.

This thesis finds itself in the middle of this tension. Conservative Baptists and conservative Catholics are both likely to view its proposals with suspicion, and for the same reason. 'If we begin to relax our traditional doctrine and discipline in the area of baptism', they could well argue, 'what will the end be?' The response of this writer is not to reject the conservative instinct, but on the contrary rather to affirm it, as well as to show that a liberal flexibility *in certain areas* is not contrary to the conservative instinct but a necessary corollary of it. Few Christians would want to return to the sixteenth century when Protestants and Catholics condemned Anabaptists to death for the 'blasphemy' of rebaptism, and when Anabaptists condemned infant baptism as being 'the mark of the antichrist' (thereby condemning to hell those who practised it). While all three aforementioned groups were zealously concerned for the true Christian faith, as most today would acknowledge, the attitudes and actions of all three were inconsistent with the higher Christian law of love. Few today would want to deny that the progress towards mutual tolerance which slowly developed in subsequent centuries was in line with the spirit and teaching of the gospel. That process must find its logical conclusion in a situation, not just of mutual tolerance between separate bodies, but also of mutual acceptance whereby various baptismal practices can coexist within a visibly united Christian fellowship.

13.5 Summary In this concluding chapter, it might be useful to briefly review some of the main lines of argument by way of a summary of the whole thesis.

- 1 In the early church of the third and fourth centuries there was an extraordinary variety of baptismal practices within the 'One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church'. These included infant baptism, believers' baptism, delayed baptism, emergency baptism and death-bed

baptism (cf chapter 6). These various baptismal practices seem to have coexisted alongside one another in the unity of the one church with remarkably little contention, as far as the information available to us goes. To have today, therefore, a variety of baptismal practices within one church or denomination would not represent any novelty but rather the revival of an ancient catholic practice, the experience of the early church.

- ii The question as to whether the apostles baptised infants or not cannot be conclusively settled on historical grounds alone. There is general agreement that direct references to the baptism of infants can be found from about the year 200 onwards (cf chapter 6). Before the year 200 there is no conclusive historical evidence that the early church did or did not baptise infants. It is widely accepted that the question as to whether the early church (before the year 200) baptised infants must be settled on theological grounds.
- iii While it is possible to speak of a general scholarly consensus about *certain* historical aspects of the practice of baptism (particularly after the year 200), there is no general theological consensus today concerning the nature, function and practice of baptism in apostolic times. Unless certain views are simply ignored because they are minority views, it has to be admitted that the Christian world is not agreed on certain key aspects of the administration of baptism in apostolic times. In this thesis three major baptismal traditions have been identified: the Catholic tradition, with its special emphasis on the efficacy of the sacraments as a means of grace; the Reformed tradition, with its understanding of baptism as the sign and seal of the covenant of grace which God has established with his people; and the Baptist tradition with its emphasis on baptism as a confession of faith. None of these traditions can be lightly dismissed as being inconsequential. Chapters 2-4 of this thesis represent a summary of the arguments of three spokesmen of these views and have been included specifically as evidence that each view can put forward a case that is both weighty and compelling.

So in addition to inconclusive historical evidence we can also speak of a theological stalemate in certain key areas of baptismal practice. Does not such a situation call for a theological truce, a decision to allow for a variety of baptismal practices while encouraging mutual respect and sensitivity in all ongoing discussions and debates on the subject?

- iv In any theological hierarchy of truths, issues such as unity, love and reconciliation between Christians feature far higher than ritual and doctrinal correctness in baptism. The lesser must not be allowed to take precedence over the greater. For Christians to allow themselves to be divided and separated from one another over the question of which is the 'correct' baptism would be to disobey the weightier and more important of God's commandments concerning reconciliation, love and unity (cf chapters 7 & 9).
- v The division of Christians into separate bodies with conflicting baptismal views renders serious reflection on the subject of baptism so much more difficult. Participants in transdenominational discussions and debates on the subject of baptism are inevitably under a certain restraint to be loyal to their denominational positions. It is psychologically difficult to make any concessions to the arguments of the 'enemy', especially if such concessions might necessitate 'crossing over the line' into the camp of the enemy. The removal of these restraints by allowing a much wider flexibility of baptismal views and practices in each camp would liberate baptismal discussions and enable them to be so much more fruitful (cf chapter 8).
- vi The concept of mutual acceptance of baptismal differences is not a completely untested idea. In certain individual congregations and even, very rarely, in whole denominations, the idea has been implemented with a surprising degree of success (cf chapter 10).
- vii Research conducted among 182 theological students representing at least twenty different denominations and studying at five different

institutions in various places in South Africa indicated that the great majority of the respondents were in favour of a unity that could transcend the baptismal differences that tend to divide Christians (cf chapter 11). Most of them expressed the belief that different baptismal convictions could be accommodated in one congregation, although not all of them had thought through what the implications of such a belief might be. Surely it would be reasonable to infer that serious attempts by churches and denominations to promote reconciliation and unity through the mutual acceptance of baptismal differences would be warmly supported by many of the faithful in most churches.

All these lines of argument and research developed in the various parts of this thesis lead to the one simple idea referred to at the beginning of this chapter - that the visible unity and fellowship between Christians ought not to be broken by baptismal differences. Rather space ought to be created by the churches for the accommodation of various baptismal practices within one united fellowship.

It needs to be emphasized that if the mutual acceptance of baptismal differences is to be authentic it must be the full acceptance of the whole package of a particular practice. This means the acceptance of (though, of course, not agreement with) some practices that have been traditionally offensive to certain Christians: the baptism of the infants of those parents who desire it; the 'rebaptism' of those believers who are unconvinced of the validity of their previous baptism and desire to be 'baptised' (cf chapter 12).

13.6 The Future What would be the result of a policy of the mutual acceptance of baptismal differences? Such things, of course, are impossible to predict with any precision. Such a policy would create the possibility of the free development of the practice of a particular church in any direction. It might transpire, for example, that eventually all Christians will accept the validity and desirability of baptising the infants of believers. Alternatively the time might come when all Christians would agree that baptism should only be administered to those

able to make some kind of profession of faith. More likely the debate will continue about the true Christian doctrine and practice of baptism and the variety of views and practices might become even more varied. Whatever the case, the overall outcome of a policy of greater flexibility and mutual acceptance of baptism differences is likely to be more positive than many would expect.

Let us look again at the issue of complete freedom of worship which, as was suggested above, has some parallels with the present issue. Those who proposed the idea four hundred years ago were scorned as impossible dreamers. 'Neither civil nor religious leaders could ordinarily conceive of a stable society that did not unite church and state (*corpus Christianum*)' (Estep 1975:194). Such a policy of religious freedom, it was felt, would lead to an impossible confusion of diverse sects which in turn would undermine social stability by destroying the foundations of orderly government. A policy of religious freedom, therefore, would lead in the end to chaos, irreligion and atheism. Mueller (1973:574) has pointed out that the principle 'One King, One Faith, One Nation' made for clear cut intolerance in religious matters, and as John Bennet put it:

Until the 17th century in Christendom it was generally taken for granted that, either to protect souls from the spiritually deadly effects of heresy or to preserve social unity by permitting only one religious allegiance within a political community, it was right for Catholic or Protestant Christians to limit the freedom of those whom they believed to be in error (Bennet 1986:239).

The policy of religious freedom did indeed seem to contribute to the development of a confusing array of Christian sects. But as for the other predictions of social collapse, anarchy and irreligion, none of these materialized. On the contrary, those societies in which religious freedom prevailed were often characterized by a high degree of social and political stability together with vigorous religious activity. The United States of America could be cited as an example, concerning which Latourette (1974:230) observes 'not since Constantine had so little connexion between church and state existed in any land where Christianity

was the prevailing form of religion.' Thomas Jefferson, one of the chief architects in the U.S.A. of the 'wall of separation between Church and State' was reviled by his enemies as 'the infidel, the atheist, the enemy of biblical revelation and the potential overthrower of ordered society and sound morality' (Whitelaw 1988:118). Such concepts of complete religious freedom were, indeed, a daring innovation at that time. They represented an uncertain but 'fair' experiment, in the words of Jefferson in 1808 towards the end of his term as President:

We have solved, by fair experiment, the great and interesting question whether freedom of religion is compatible with order in government, and obedience to the laws. And we have experienced the quiet as well as the comfort which results from leaving everyone to profess freely and openly those principles of religion which are the inductions of his own reason, and the serious convictions of his own inquiries (Whitelaw 1988:120).

Those who, centuries ago, made such dire and confident predictions of the disastrous consequences of a policy of religious freedom would probably stand astonished today to see the positive and beneficial results in church and society of just such a policy. Roger Williams was banned from the colony of Massachusetts and condemned by the great Cotton Mather for believing that: '*God requireth not an uniformity of Religion to be inacted and enforced in any civill state; which enforced uniformity (sooner or later) is the greatest occasion of civill Warre, ravishing of conscience, persecution of Jesus Christ in his servants, and of the hypocrisie and destruction of millions of souls*' (Sweet 1950:70). Today he is honoured in the same country as the man who 'stood bravely and firmly for complete separation of Church and State', principles which 'have become fundamental American principles of government', representing the 'great contribution on the part of the Baptists to the solving of a problem that had caused trouble ever since the conversion of the emperor Constantine the Great in 312' (Kuiper 1979:331-332).

Likewise, the widespread implementation in churches today of a mutual acceptance of baptismal differences would possibly lead to an even more

confusing array of baptismal practices. Yet it might well also lead to greater mutual respect and understanding between Christians, a greater sensitivity towards different views, a stronger and deeper unity between Christians, a higher level of religious knowledge and commitment and a far more effective outreach to the world. And as for the increase in diversity of baptismal practices, it seems to be almost an inevitable law of growth that as the church grows in numbers and maturity it grows too in variety of manifestations, complexity of organisation and diversity of practices. With respect to the increasing diversity to be found within Christianity, David Edwards has made the following observations:

In my own education of study, travel, listening and thinking, I have found two themes growing ever larger in my mind. One is the theme of diversity. ... this diversity in church life is a fact which will not go away. And my 'educated guess' is that any unity will have to be found amid this astounding diversity, denominational and regional, temperamental and institutional, within a world population which already in AD 1986 includes five thousand million different people.

But another theme has also gained power in my mind the further I have probed. It is the conviction that a Christian communion including all this diversity is possible although it must be conceived in a way that is genuinely open to the variety and the change. Too often Christians seeking 'unity' have attempted to retreat to some narrow formula in theology or to return to some legendary golden age in the past. The truth about the Christian past teaches what is possible. In the Christian Scriptures, in the early Christian centuries and in the experience of the modern churches, there is immense diversity with jewels as well as trash in abundance. But there is also one very precious pearl. The shared experience of the God embodied in Jesus Christ unites Christians in the 'fellowship of the Holy Spirit'; in valuing the Bible, baptism and the eucharist and therefore an ordained 'ministry'; and in producing the authenticating fruits, the Christlike character and the Christlike action. The challenge to the Christian who thinks about the futures is to imagine a communion based on the realities of this unifying experience and big enough to cover the diversity now seen to be

inescapable and now welcomed as the will of an imaginative Creator.

Am I in some way being false to the spirit of Christianity if I stress these two themes of *diversity* and *communion*? I do not think so. For I find that these themes run through the Bible and the very early Christian centuries (Edwards 1987:17-18).

The sentiments expressed by the liberal Anglican David Edwards are very much the same as those of the conservative Baptist author of this thesis. Doubtless there would be some differences of opinion in the practical and detailed application of these sentiments. It is doubtful, on the one hand, whether Edwards would be willing to accept the central idea of this thesis, while some of those issues considered primary by this writer, on the other hand, would probably be considered secondary by Edwards. But the point made by Edwards remains valid. The diversity of Christian practices is extraordinarily wide and continues to increase with the growth of the church throughout the world. Yet the command to 'love one another' in the unity of the Spirit remains a primary command of the Lord of the church. This unity will only be realised through the mutual acceptance of a diversity of practices in all areas where the substance of the faith is not undermined, and one of these areas is baptism.

The focus of this entire thesis has been on the one issue of baptism. But it will be clear to the reader that the principles enunciated have far wider application than just baptism. They have application to all those areas classified as 'secondary' in chapter 9 - structures of church government, patterns of ministry, forms of worship, rites, liturgies and special observances.

'Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom' (2 Cor. 3.17). The Apostolic church, portrayed for us in the pages of the New Testament, was characterised by a passionate commitment to the truth of the gospel together with a remarkable liberty of spirit in things of a secondary nature. As such it remains a challenge to the church of this age and to the church of every age.

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